



# University of Reading

## **Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education in China: Barriers and Strategies.**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Institute of Education

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## **Declaration**

### **Declaration of Original Authorship:**

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Jiayi Zhao

## **Acknowledgements**

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好直不好学, 其蔽也绞:A frank person without knowledge, the disadvantage is that his or her words are sharp and stingy;

好勇不好学, 其蔽也乱:A brave person without knowledge, the disadvantage is to make trouble;

好刚不好学, 其蔽也狂:An unyielding person without knowledge, the disadvantage is being arrogant and reckless.

## Abstract

Women's employment rates in China are amongst the highest in the world; however, only a relatively small proportion of these women ever rise to senior leadership positions (Attane, 2012). A similar pattern can be seen in higher education (HE). Although nowadays women serve as president and senior managers at universities and many women have engaged management roles, relatively few make a break through the so-called 'glass ceiling' into senior leadership (Sheng, 2009). From past decades, China has gone through radical social change and scholars have begun to draw attention to female leadership in the Chinese context, but there is limited research on women and leadership in HE. Therefore, this research seeks to examine the career paths, experiences and aspirations of women in mid-career academic roles, since that is a career stage where the 'glass ceiling' appears to present a barrier to further career progression. Underpinning this study is an analytical framework which incorporates four main themes, which are the gender theory, women and leadership theory, the research economy, and the concept of career capital.

Following a sequential mixed methods design, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed, beginning with an online questionnaire with a sample of 391 mid-career academic women working in Chinese higher education. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 16 women. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and multivariate statistics in SPSS. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and triangulated with the quantitative results.

This research has analysed the internal and external barriers and difficulties that present to their progression to senior leadership positions in higher education. The findings suggest that the major barriers in mid-career academic women's promotion in China were the pressures from promotion requirements, especially the requirement for publications. This research provides a critique of the way that academic success has become increasingly tied to metrics and indicators. The findings contribute to the field of women's educational leadership studies. The findings have important implications for education policy makers and university leaders.

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## **Chapter One. Introduction**

### **1.1. Introduction**

Women's employment rates in China are amongst the highest in the world; in 2018, the proportion of female employees in China's total employment was 43.7% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). In such a large number of female employees, only a relatively small proportion ever rise to senior and executive leadership positions in different fields (Attane, 2012). A similar pattern can be seen in higher education. Although nowadays women serve as president and senior managers at universities and many women have held management roles, relatively few make a break through the so-called 'glass ceiling' into senior leadership (Sheng, 2009).

In recent years some research has emerged concerning the career path of female leadership, but most of those studies concentrate on enterprises and institutions in the field of public administration (Hu, 2009; Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2016). Some of them used qualitative studies such as interviews and action research, while others used quantitative research to investigate the structural model and scale development of women's career success (Xiao & Luo, 2015). However, the promotion of women into leadership in higher education is rarely considered in the literature, especially the promotion of middle-level female leaders to the senior level. In China, the career management of female teachers (lecturers) in higher education is a relatively new topic. According to the research on the professional dilemma of higher education teachers, higher educational institutions and teachers themselves pay less attention to planning and designing a career (Dai et al., 2018; Li, 2021). Studies of professional values and career planning are scarce both in terms of theoretical insight and what happens in practice.

This chapter establishes the background of this study and outlines the thesis structure. The research problems, problems and objectives are clarified, and the main research objectives

are identified. In addition, this chapter also relates the author's personal and professional interest in this topic, as well as the significance and outcomes of this study. It further sets out the conceptual framework of this study and outlines the basic structure of this thesis and the contents of the remaining chapters.

## **1.2. Identifying the Research Problem.**

At the beginning of reform and opening up in the 1980s, in order to improve the level of scientific research in higher education, China began to learn from the experience of American higher education, and the personnel system was one of the highlights. The outstanding problems faced by Chinese universities at that time were seriously redundant personnel and relatively low scientific research ability. In 1983, the ratio of the number of students to the number of teachers once reached 3.98 to 1, and many young and middle-aged teachers in higher education had not received strict academic training. The 'tenure-track' had been widely accepted in the United States and all over the world, so the experts in China tried to introduce this method in Chinese higher education (Zhang, 2015). However, it was in 2003 that the universities really began to try the reform of 'publish or perish' (Tang & Horta, 2020), which refers to the young scholar signing a 3-year or 5-year contract with the university; if they do not meet the corresponding standards for promotion, then they will face the risk of unemployment (Xu, 2021). Thus, there is the so-called 'iron rice bowl' (tiě fàn wǎn), which means a secure job that will never be lost is hard to get in Chinese higher education.

In American higher education, the tenure-track has a supporting system, which is the essential part that China has not learned. American universities are very cautious in recruiting Assistant Professors for tenure. Once they decide to hire a teacher, they will provide corresponding faculty training and sabbatical leave, and other supporting measures to reduce the burden on the teachers (Zhang, 2015). However, in China, the competition for

teaching posts is very fierce in higher education. Promotion to a higher professional title or leadership position entails undertaking more teaching and administrative tasks. Especially for women who take on multiple roles in family life, they need to think carefully before making decisions (Feng, 2020; Xu, 2021). Moreover, due to the imbalance of higher education resources in different regions, a very limited number of flagship universities often enjoy the prestigious title and have more research capital. Thus, the teachers in the flagship universities will not leave easily, only for a professional title or promotion. With the new PhD graduates pouring into the job market every year, the competition is becoming more and more fierce. Driven by a variety of university ranking lists, the universities are paying more and more attention to the number of published papers, and the quantitative indicators have begun to influence the academic awards and also provide a visible and measurable research achievement (Li & Shen, 2020).

In a recently published paper, scholars from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and the University of New South Wales in Australia conducted a survey on female university teachers. Only 17.3% of the respondents supported the ‘publish or perish’ system, and nearly half opposed it. Among the female teachers who signed the ‘publish or perish’ contract, 61% said they were under great pressure (Li & Shen, 2020). Dating back to 1999, the number of Doctoral graduates in China exceeded 10,000 for the first time, and 53,700 Doctoral graduates had graduated by 2014 (Xu, 2021). In the early years, few university teachers held Doctoral degrees, but now almost all the young teachers newly recruited by the university have Doctoral degrees from domestic and overseas universities. The real controversy behind this rise lies in the rationality of promotion and competition standards. At present, in China's higher education, quantitative indicators are the most important basis for promotion; in short, the number of published papers is the dominating indicator.

The mid-career academic women in this research refer to the women who have worked in higher education for more than five years to around their 50 years old. This is because the

female scholars generally graduate with PhD degrees around 30 years old, and the current retirement age for women is 55 years old in China. The detailed reasons were discussed in section 4.6. Moreover, the mid-career stage probably encompasses the longest period of most academic women's working lives, and they are considering promotion and leadership and might be over-burdened with large administrative roles, such as programme leadership (Kandiko et al., 2018). The mid-career academic women in China are now in such an embarrassing status, for when they entered universities in the early years, they could catch the last bus of the 'iron rice bowl'. After years of rapid development of China's higher education, a large number of internationally competitive Doctoral graduates enter higher education to start working (Li & Shen, 2020). If the mid-career academic women do not consider the promotion and improve their academic ability, they will face fierce competition. Although they could keep their titles and work in the HE institutions until they retire, their chances of promotion are limited. In this context, many female scholars in their mid-career began to think how they could survive and be promoted in higher education. However, the promotion requires more metrics and indicators that may hinder their way to promotion (Dai, 2018; Shao et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020).

China has a unique historical and cultural context in the world, and there have been few literatures on the concept of leadership since the ancient times. The concept of leadership discussed in modern times is also developed from Western literature. The ancient Chinese scholars mainly discussed the ways of governing the country, which involve the theme of leadership (Zhang, 2016). Influenced by Chinese culture, leadership in the Chinese context means more than leading a group of people to achieve a common goal (Wei, 2002). Moreover, it includes morality and diligence, which mean having a high moral character and a positive working attitude and dedication. Leadership also means the ability to analyse and judge, to make decisions, coordinate and solve disputes, as well as the strong execution ability in practical work (Wang & Yue, 2014). Therefore, many people in leadership

positions do not consider or call themselves ‘leaders’; rather, they like to be called ‘teacher’, which is why the word ‘teacher’ is commonly used in this study.

Nowadays, it is common that women serve as senior leaders in higher education in China, but the female leaders in universities have disadvantages compared with their male colleagues (Wang et al., 2014). The traditional role stereotypes and marginalisation in the appointment of female leaders in universities still exist (Liu, 2018). In addition, there are more than 2,000 higher education institutions in China with more than half of their employees being female, though the proportion of female principals is very small. The proportion of female presidents in first-class universities is even lower: only three female presidents were in the 59 ‘double first-class’ universities in China by 2020 (MOE, 2020). In this respect, there are still many efforts to be made to achieve gender equality in higher education, and more female leaders are needed in the higher-level leadership. Also, there is a lack of publications that provide enough resource and reflection on the results in terms of using mixed research methods to generate knowledge with breadth and depth.

Based on the above-mentioned reform of the promotion system in Chinese higher education, combined with China’s unique cultural background, the perspective of this study focuses on the career of a group of academic women in their middle career stage. They have worked in higher education for many years and have leadership responsibilities. Facing the reality of fierce competition and the quantitative promotion standards, this thesis intends to explore the mid-career academic women’s career trajectories and the obstacles that they think may hinder their career progress and further promotion. By using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, this study attempts to draw corresponding conclusions from their descriptions, which could provide suggestions and inspirations for the females in Chinese higher education and those who are expecting to enter higher education.

Against the backdrop of globalisation, neoliberalism has also extended to the countries participating in the global economy (Davies & Bansel, 2007) and China's higher education reform is also moving towards marketisation (Tang, 2014). As Morley and Crossouard (2016) argued, neoliberalism is not just about injury or subjectification, it can also be about material and symbolic reward and recognition. The academic women who could not adapt to this change are injured while someone who complied with the market-driven and metricised performance indicators would benefit from it (Morley & Crossouard, 2016). Ball (2012) claimed that there is a commercial power to seek profits from the sale of educational 'services' in the reform of higher education. This has become part of the institutional financial planning and business ventures, which involves the commercialisation of academic practices in various ways. The female scholars who entered the university with relatively simple motivation and purpose were involved in the tide of higher education reform. They probably do not understand the importance of their career capital and how to operate the capital in the marketised atmosphere. This could be one of the reasons that the mid-career academic women are stuck in their current positions, and it is worth investigating the barriers from the perspective of the research economy.

### **1.3. The Researcher's Personal and Professional Interest in the Topic**

Previous research conducted by the author in her MA course focused on the multiple roles, conflicting responsibilities and the personal and professional choices made by women in higher education leadership in China. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with nine female academics in two Chinese universities, the author found that these women were influenced by the interplay of identities and the influence of broader societal discourses of gender and leadership. The findings highlight the interplay between competing multiple identities and illustrate how the women's identities are shaped and constrained by dominant historical and cultural factors in Chinese society. While this research contributes to understanding the key issues surrounding women and leadership in China's universities,

there are still some limitations, such as the scope of the study was limited in the participants' number and region, as well as the length of the interview not being enough to explore more in-depth topics. Further and more research is needed in a broader range of higher education contexts that could reveal a diversity of views from a specific age group; to be specific, the mid-career academic women who are in middle leadership in China mainland universities. Moreover, motivated by reading the literature and empirical research on women's careers, career capital and the research economy conducted in Western contexts, the author wants to explore further these topics in Chinese contexts.

In addition, the career path planning and development of academic women is also a problem that many scholars in China had paid attention to (Li & Shen, 2020; Tang, & Horta, 2021; Xu, 2021). In recent years, a term called 'involution' (nèi juǎn) has quickly triggered a heated debate in China. Involution was originally used in agricultural economy, but it now refers to an inward over-elaboration due to extremely fierce competition. The involution is also commonly seen in Chinese higher education institutes. In 2020, the 'National Governance Weekly' published a survey of young higher education teachers (under the age of 45). The results showed that 'professional title evaluation' and 'publishing papers' were the main pressures for young higher education teachers in China. Among the more than 3,000 participants, more than half (57.16%) made it clear that their working time reached '996' (this refers to the working system of working from 9 am to 9 pm, and working for 6 days a week), and 12.22% of the respondents said that their working time was more than '996' (Xu, 2021). This indicates that working in the university is no longer as easy as people traditionally thought. In the past, the social understanding of the university teachers' work was very relaxed and had many holidays, and young girls strived to study for a PhD degree in order to pursue this decent and idle job. In fact, young scholars often use a straightforward term to describe the current employment situation: 'promotion or out' (which equals to 'publish or perish') (Li & Shen, 2020; Tang & Horta, 2020). It showed the cruelty of this promotion system: after getting a Doctoral degree or a postdoctoral position, young scholars

start their career at the age of 30 or later, but they might be under the pressure of unemployment by the age of 35. In the 3-year or 5-year contract signed with the university, if the young scholar does not meet the corresponding standards for promotion, then they will face the risk of unemployment (Xu, 2021).

On the one hand, the female scholars are striving for higher degrees or a higher professional title to find better jobs. On the other hand, it is a common social issue that gender bias is existing in higher education. When talking about the female PhD students, people regard this group of women as ‘alien’, ‘alternative’ and ‘the third gender (or sex)’, which is accompanied by many bewilderments and undeliverable problems in both their life and study (Morley, 2014). Moreover, most of the female students are limited to choose majors like tourism management, etiquette service and tour guide, fashion show, image design, preschool education, home economics, and so on, in the higher education. All those majors are considered to be suitable for girls from the traditional stereotypes (Yan et al., 2006). In addition, in 2017, the ‘Employment Report of Chinese College Students’ showed that the three most popular jobs for girls are accountants, teachers and nurses; and that engaging in education, banking and nursing made most of the female graduates feel a sense of happiness (Chinajob, 2018). These numbers are from about 250,000 samples nationwide, which means that more and more female graduates are anticipating engaging in an education career without a clear career planning. Some women may pursue further education and want to find a job in higher education institutions with their postgraduate degrees, but because of the information asymmetry, they are not aware that the academic road is also full of obstacles. It is not only crucial for the researcher herself, who is a female PhD student now, but also important for the research in this field.

Thus, the purpose of this study is also to give an overview of the current working conditions of academic women in universities, and to present the difficulties and challenges encountered in this career to new female academics or Doctoral students. This is to help the

new female academics fully understand the responsibilities, obligations, pressures and responsibilities of this job, rather than blindly choosing this career because of the suggestions of the elder generations or traditional ideas, without clear career prospect planning.

## **1.4. Research Aims, Objectives and Questions**

### **1.4.1. Study Aims**

Therefore, combining the personal and academic motivations, this research seeks to contribute to closing the gap concerning the under-representation of women in leadership positions in higher education institutions and the prevalent glass ceiling at mid-career stage. The study will explore factors affecting the mid-career academic women's careers in universities in China. Specifically, it will examine the opportunities and barriers, both internal and external, that present in women's professional career paths, and the strategies they adopt if women seek to progress their career. This research aims to provide theoretical and practical outcomes for researchers, policy makers, universities and women themselves, to support women's career development in universities in China.

### **1.4.2. Study Objectives**

- To explore the evaluation and experience of the mid-career academic women's career trajectories in Chinese higher education.
- To explore the career prospects of the mid-career academic women and their evaluations of the promotion standards in their current institutes, as well as their aspiration of further promotion.
- To explore the obstacles to the mid-career academic women's promotion and how they overcome the barriers and pursue career opportunities.
- To find any possible strategies that the mid-career academic women adopted to further their career.

### **1.4.3. Research Questions**

This research seeks to contribute to closing the gap in terms of theoretical insight and what happens in practice. Therefore, the research question is:

**What strategies do mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to further their career?**

The sub-questions (RQ) include:

RQ1: How do the mid-career academic women in higher education describe and construct their academic career trajectories?

RQ2: What personal and professional motivators influence the choices the mid-career academic women in higher education made in their career path?

RQ3: How do the mid-career academic women in higher education evaluate their current aspiration?

RQ4: What are the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership in the mid-career academic women's current position?

RQ5: What strategies, if any, do the mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to overcome barriers and pursue career opportunities?

## **1.5 Overview of the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

There are four main themes in the conceptual framework, which are the gender theory, women and leadership theory, the research economy, and the concept of career capital. The most fundamental theories of the current research are gender theory and leadership theory. Gender theory is an essential component of this research because the intersection of gender and other roles in women's lives profoundly impacts this study. Starting from gender theory helps ensure that this research is grounded in women's experiences. Gender studies started late in China, and until the end of the 1990s, the Chinese female scholars in many colleges and universities began to support the theory of gender and write related articles and publications (Liu, 2011). The discussions on women and leadership have received extensive

attention worldwide, especially in Western countries. In contrast, the understanding of women leadership in China is still limited in terms of the educational field.

The concept of the research economy is relevant to the academic environment in which social and cultural capital is generated and exchanged, and the academic recognition of a scholar can bring tangible and intangible returns (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). In contemporary times, higher education systems and individuals are under increasing pressure, and scholars' academic work involves a wider range of activities that is more closely linked to industry (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011; Molas-Gallart et al., 2002). Underpinning the topic of motivation and prestige, the research economy has gradually become a dominant concept within Western universities. The new model of research economy is a hybrid of industry and research, which comprise knowledge production, commodification and marketisation (Bastalich, 2010; Morley, 2018). The HE management is to some degree over-reliant on performance measurement, which has an impact on the culture of these institutions and the behaviours of the scholars. For instance, the standards for measuring a teacher's performance are heavily based on the publications and research outcomes, which might lead to a competitive and results-oriented atmosphere within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Fletcher et al., 2007). The scholars in higher education are now facing the dilemma that they should consider their teaching and research as marketable commodities in this marketised higher education system (Morley, 2018). Although the encouragement on the research-focused academic atmosphere could attract talents and promote the high-quality research development of the university, the mid-career academic women are not well-prepared for such changes in their personal academic ability and will bear great pressure.

Career capital is an important concept in an individual's career and people continually invests in their career throughout their life (Yao, 2013). Career capital is the non-financial resources embedded in itself and recognised by the external labour market, which is formed by the relevant subjects through learning and accumulating professional knowledge, skills and experience in the process of their career (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). This concept is

closely related to the mid-career academic women's career trajectories, and it is not a commonly used term among women in the educational field. In China, this concept is merely applied in the human resources field and no research was found in the educational context. Thus, this research initiatively introduces this concept into the Chinese higher education context to identify useful strategies to help the academic women's career.

## **1.6 Overview of the Methodology**

The explanatory sequential mixed methods approach was adopted in this research. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were considered to be appropriate for explanatory sequential mixed methods. This research started with a questionnaire that was disseminated to the participants who were considered to be the mid-career academic women in Chinese higher education in this study. Snowball sampling was adopted to reach more potential participants. As a result, 391 teachers participated in this survey. In the second stage of the research, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the 16 participants who gave consent to take part in the interview. They were selected as women in middle or senior level of leadership who had at least five years of working experience. Finally, the participants came from 30 provinces, autonomous regions or municipalities directly under the central government in China.

The details of the research methodology are discussed in detail in Chapter Four, which includes the underpinning rationale and research paradigm, the research design, the procedures of data collection and the data analysis process. Further important components, such as the quality criteria, ethical considerations and limitations of the study, are also presented there.

## **1.7 Significance and Outcomes of the Study**

The general aim of this research is to study the experiences and perceptions of women in the exercise of leadership in university organisations. To analyse the barriers and difficulties, both internal and external, present in the professional career path of women who occupy leadership positions in higher education, both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted. The questionnaire covered their feelings and elicited comments on some issues related to gender difference in the workplace, the leadership and management practices of their leaders, and their opinions on some aspects related to their career. The in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews were undertaken afterwards to explore the personal and professional motivators and the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership in their current position.

Combining the two phases and based on the experiences of the female leaders within the HEIs, this study explores the barriers and challenges that mid-career female academics are faced with in their career path. It has increased the understanding of Chinese women's leadership, especially in higher education. It has added knowledge to provide a better understanding of the social phenomenon of leadership and gender, and it will contribute to future gender-related research in China. The findings from this study suggest that the major barriers in mid-career academic women's promotion in China were the pressures from promotion requirements, especially the publications. This research has also extended the model of academic motivation and criticised the fact that current academic improvement has become more and more tied to metrics and indicators. Strategies of resolving the mid-career barriers are proposed and implications for the leadership pipeline in China's universities are discussed and recommendations made for future research directions.

## **1.8 Structure of the Thesis**

Following this introduction chapter, Chapter Two is ‘Contextualising the Study’, and provides an overview of the geography, demographics, brief history and education in China. It concentrates on higher education in China and provides detailed information about the study context of Chinese higher education. This chapter also introduces the current women's status in China; to be specific, it provides general information on women's education in HE, the status of gender equality in Chinese HE, women and culture and women in leadership in HE.

Chapter Three is the Literature Review, which describes and analyses the relevant literature in greater detail. It focuses on four important concepts that underpin this research, which are gender theory, leadership theory, the research economy and career capital.

Chapter Four is ‘Research Design and Methodology’, which presents the research paradigm of this study and the justification for its adoption. It also introduces the details of the research design, the research implementation, and data analysis. The chapter further provides a profile of the participants in the sample and outlines the ethical considerations.

Chapter Five presents the ‘Results and Findings’. Reflecting the quantity of data of the two research stages, the chapter is divided into two main parts. The first part focuses on the data interpretation in the quantitative stage. The second part analyses the content of interviews in the qualitative research. Based on the order of research questions from one to five, this chapter answers each question with the integration of the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative stage.

Chapter Six, the ‘Discussion’, interprets the results in relation to the literature review and associated theories, which are discussed in this study following the order of the research questions.

Chapter Seven is the ‘Conclusion’ of this thesis, which summarises the key findings for each research question. This is followed by a number of recommendations, as well as the limitations and implications of the research. This chapter concludes with some suggestions for future studies.

## **Chapter Two: Contextualising the Study**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter outlines the important aspects of women's status and women's leadership in higher education in China. It begins with the geography, demographics and a brief history of China. Then, it outlines an overview of education in China, followed by a detailed explanation of higher education in China, which includes a brief history of higher education, the numbers of higher education institutes, and the numbers of students. The scale and information of graduates and teachers in HEIs are presented to provide an overview of the quantity of higher education in China. A brief introduction on the projects of national key universities and the 'Principal Accountability System' is discussed because it relates to the classification of Chinese universities at different levels and the promotion mechanism of university leaders. Correspondingly, this chapter also introduces the current status of women in China, which includes general information on women's education in HE, the status of gender equality in Chinese HE, and culture and women in leadership in HE.

### **2.2. Geography and Demographics**

China lies in the east of Asia and the west coast of the Pacific. The land area is about 9,600,000 square kilometres, and there are more than 7,600 large and small islands in the sea area, of which Taiwan is the largest island (35,798 square kilometres). The provincial administrative divisions are four municipalities, 23 provinces, five autonomous regions and two special administrative regions; the capital city is Beijing (GOV, 2021). According to the Seventh National Census data in 2020 in China, released on May 11, 2021, the total population of the country is over one billion four hundred and eleven million. In total, there are 56 ethnic groups in China, which is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country. The Han nationality accounts for 91.11%, while 8.89% of the population consists of ethnic minorities. The common spoken and written languages of the country are Putonghua and standard

Chinese characters (GOV, 2021). Putonghua (Standard Mandarin) is the standard Chinese language. In addition to the use of Chinese, people in different regions have their own dialects or use Chinese to different degrees (Su, 2018; MOE, 2021).

### **2.3. Brief History (1949 - present)**

On October 1, 1949, the opening ceremony was held in Beijing, which marked the foundation of the People's Republic of China. In the early 1950s, the government carried out large-scale urban industrial and commercial transformation and collectivisation of rural land and social reform. By 1956, China had basically established a socialist system and entered the primary stage of socialism. After ten years of China's Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976), in 1979, under the guidance of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the country gradually began to implement the responsibility system based on household contract, that is, 'divide the field to the household and bear the profit and loss' (Ho, 2014). On July 15, 1979, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council decided to pilot the special economic zones in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen in the initial stage of reform and opening-up policy, and the introduction of foreign capital was in the trial stage. It created a large number of employment opportunities, and accelerated the development of foreign trade, and enhanced the international competitiveness of the economy (GOV, 2021). It has been over 40 years since the opening-up policy, and China has seen an impressive economic development. The changes had an impact on both education and employment opportunities for women in China.

### **2.4. Current Women's Status in China**

According to the Statistical Monitoring Report on the outline of China's women's development (2011-2020), released in 2019, the overall progress of the implementation of the outline is satisfied, and most of the goals have been achieved ahead of schedule, but there

are still gaps in some areas of individual indicators, and the protection of women's rights and interests in related areas still needs to be strengthened. This report comprehensively analysed the implementation of the outline in seven areas, including health, education, economy, decision-making and management, social security, environment and law. In these areas, women's participation in economic life are of great importance in this research. The proportion of women in the employment of the whole society has been maintained at more than 40%. In 2019, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and nine other departments issued the notice on further standardising the recruitment behaviour and promoting women's employment, which specifies six kinds of employment sex discrimination behaviours that cannot be implemented and provides strong support for ensuring women's equal right to employment. In 2019, the proportion of female employees in China was 43.2%. The number of female employees in urban areas reached 66.842 million, with an increase of 37.5% over 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020).

In terms of women's health, with the continual strengthening of China's basic public health services, the women's reproductive health services continue to strengthen, and the maternal health care system is gradually improving. In addition, girls' equal access to preschool education has been guaranteed. With the continual development of China's compulsory education, the right of girls to equal access to education has been further strengthened. The net enrolment rate of primary school-age children has reached 99.9% or more for five consecutive years, which shows that great progress has been made in eliminating the gender gap in China's compulsory education. There are 18.82 million female students in senior high school, accounting for 47.1% of all students, which is higher than the proportion of female students in preschool education and compulsory education. Besides, female students account for more than half of higher education in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020).

#### **2.4.1. Women and Culture**

As culture is an invisible fact embedded in gender topics, explicit observation should be valued when conceptualising this important issue. When defining a culture, the shared values, beliefs, ceremonies and the day-to-day practice in a given group are the factors that should be taken into consideration. Culture could also exist at the national, geographical level or within an organisational context. French et al. (2011) believe that culture can be defined as ‘the system of shared values and beliefs that develops within an organisation and guides the behaviour of its members’. While Schein's definition of culture is that ‘cultural is a pattern of basic assumptions-invent it, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems... that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and for you and feel in relation to the problems’ (Walker, 2010). Although there is no single agreed definition, the factors that are implied in these definitions include some social expectations and standards, general acknowledged signs, language behaviours, events and people that embody that culture. In consequence, gendered beliefs are shaped by culture.

Being one of the world's oldest cultures and originating thousands of years ago, Chinese culture is extremely diverse and varying, and it has a profound impact from every perspective on Chinese people. In the feudal society that lasted for thousands of years, the state took the feudal autocratic centralization as the governing form that was based on the patriarchal clan system, which evolved from the paternal system of paternal clan society. The patriarchal clan system is not only a class system but also a kind of ethics in the imperial and ancient China. Under this system, a set of requirements and norms aimed at standardizing each person's words and actions that meet the requirements of hierarchical human relations are generated, and a feudal etiquette with the basic features and basic contents of ‘the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues’ (pinyin: Sāngang Wǔcháng), ‘the three obediences and the four virtues’ (pinyin: Sāncóng Sìdé) and ‘men are superior to women’

(pinyin: Nánzūn Nǚbēi) was formed. Fundamentally speaking, it served to maintain the unified rule of feudalism, stabilize the feudal order, and impose bondage, slavery and oppression on the majority of ancient Chinese women (Wei, 2002).

Being the official philosophy throughout most of Imperial China's history, Confucian culture has taken the dominant position of social and official ideology since the Han Dynasty (207 B.C.- A.D. 202) in China. It is guided by Confucianism (also known as Ruism), which was created by Confucius in the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C.-221 B.C.) and developed by his followers and successors in a long history of succession. The Confucian doctrine has been praised by the monarchs of the feudal dynasties in ancient China, and the end of official Confucianism was in 1905, which was the year of the abolition of the feudal imperial examination system. The development and inheritance of Confucianism play a decisive role in the development of Chinese culture (Li, 2003).

Confucianism is not only an ancient philosophy and a religion, but a humanistic or rationalistic religion, and also simply a way of life (Yao, 2000, p.38-47). The subordination of women in China is also attributed to Confucianism (Mak, 2013). The women were asked to obey 'the three obediences and the four virtues', which were a set of basic moral principles specifically for women in Confucianism (Yu, 2016). The three obediences mean a woman was required to obey her father before her marriage and obey her husband during married life and her sons in widowhood; the four virtues stand for physical charm, fidelity, propriety in speech and efficiency in needlework (Wei, 2002; Li, 2014). Women in imperial and ancient China were restricted from participating in various realms of social life, through social stipulations that they remain indoors, whilst the business outside should be conducted by men. Although during the Tang dynasty, women had greater freedom in social life, the status of women declined from the Song dynasty onward with the rise of neo-Confucianism.

From the traditional view, heading toward the path of an official career and rising in the official world have long been seen as men's jobs. These men were likened to putting out the pillar or backbone of the whole family while women helped to engage in agricultural production in rural areas, and worked in the low strata of society in cities and towns. The principle of 'to help the husband and teach the children' (pinyin: Xiàngfū Jiào zǐ) was advocated by the feudal society. It is an important part of the Confucian culture to regulate women's social value by measuring and reflecting the functions of women through the social status and value of men. It deprives women of the consciousness of the subject and the spirit of independence. Women were trapped in the family life by the behaviour and norms they were taught so that they could pursue limited emotional satisfaction and the realization of a poor life value. It made women have low social status and made them form the idea that a woman's honour depends on her husband's or son's social status (Wei, 2002). After several thousand years of Chinese feudal society, it is hard to eliminate the thought that men should work outside while women take care of the home inside (Lu, 2010). In modern society, although the new trend of thought has replaced the old concept, some of the historical traditions are still retained due to the Confucianism being deeply rooted in the Chinese people's mind (Mak, 2013).

Since the founding of new China, promoting women's all-round development and gender equality has been an important part of socialism in China. The socialists in China believe that a school is an important place for the reproduction of labour and for promoting gender equality. They also believe that equal opportunities policy should be implemented in education and all female scholars have the right to express themselves and they have academic freedom. They insisted that the education system should be free and international, and that the curriculum should also fight against racial discrimination and gender discrimination (Yu, 2017).

The new generation of educated Chinese women realises that is impossible to achieve a real equality with men if they do not participate in the political, economic and cultural life of the society. Only when women are economically independent can they bring about reliable political and cultural status. From this perspective, the contemporary educated women pursue the status and social responsibility of the professional women, as well as their irreplaceable significant role in family life. At the same time, the similarity between modern society and ancient times is that the family is still the most basic constituent cell of the society viewed as an organism. A woman plays the main role in the family and she has a natural and important family responsibility of being a wife or a mother. Women conscientiously shoulder the responsibilities and obligations of housewives out of their own intention, so the role of the new housewife is completely different from the old housewife in Confucian culture. Nowadays, they take the initiative and are independent, and they play multiple roles – they are scholars, teachers, and managers outside, and wives and mothers at home (Lu, 2010; West, 2014).

#### **2.4.2. Gender Equality in Chinese Higher Education**

With the rapid expansion of the scale of China's higher education, the number of higher practitioners has increased dramatically, and gender equality in China's higher education is also being promoted in terms of female students and the female workforce. On the one hand, the national policies support gender equality and promote social awareness of women's social status, which helps to create a more open working environment for women. On the other hand, the private higher education institutions were established in 1993, which led to the expansion of the whole higher education industry and increased the rate of enrolment, along with promoting the demand for labour in the field of higher education (Meng, 2017). While women's participation in the HE workforce has grown significantly, gender equality has not been fully achieved.

There are some differences in the recruitment of men and women; some workplaces prefer to employ men rather than women, for example, in respect of some manual work. The education sector is one of the few sectors that tends to involve women rather than men (Webster, 2011). However, the proportion and number of women participating in higher education could not fully reflect the status of women in higher education. Although the number of high-level female professors is growing rapidly, this proportion is not consistent with that of male professors, which may affect the women becoming senior leaders in higher education (Meng, 2017). The situation in education is similar to that in other sectors of China, including business. Despite the improvement of the population's education, and the popularisation of law, culture still seriously affects people's inherent concept of women's leadership.

In addition, as mentioned in section 2.5.4. *The Higher Education Workforce*, although there are more than 2,000 higher education institutions in China with more than half of their employees being female, the proportion of female principals is very small, and most of these women worked in Humanities and Social Sciences. The proportion of female presidents in first-class universities was even lower, and the female presidents in universities have obvious disadvantages compared with their male counterparts (Wang et al., 2014). In this sense, there are still many efforts to be made to achieve gender equality in higher education, and in the labour force in the field of education.

## **2.5. Higher Education in China**

Given this study focuses on women in leadership in Chinese higher education, it is significant to outline an overview of the history and current situation of Chinese higher education, as well as introduce the female workforce and female students. Chinese education can be roughly divided into four stages, which are preschool education, primary education, secondary education and higher education (MOE, 2017). In this research, higher education

refers to the universities and colleges in China. China's national university entrance exam (Gaokao) is a prerequisite for entrance into higher education institutions.

### **2.5.1. Brief History of Higher Education**

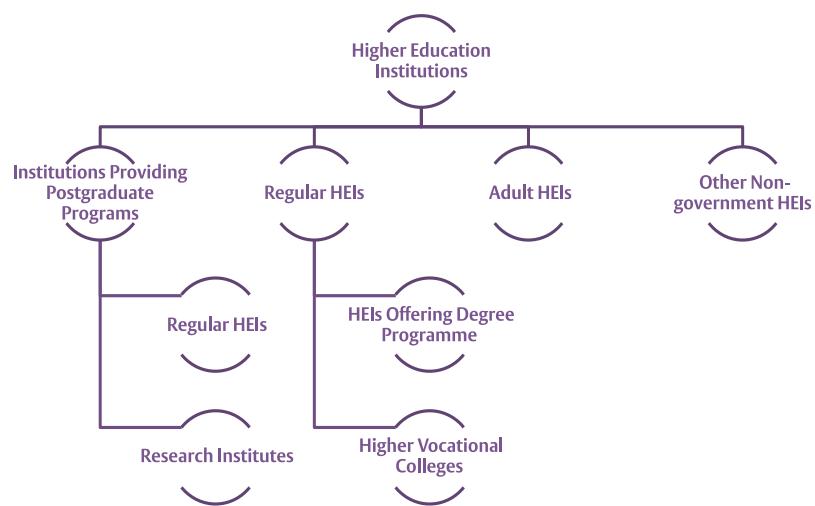
Chinese higher education has its multiple historical origins and unique development model, which were accompanied by the development of Chinese civilisation and its revolution. In the pre-modern China, only the royal family and senior officials had the privilege to attend higher education. The teachers of higher education in ancient China mainly taught Confucian classics. These taught texts were also the contents of the imperial examination. This connection between the content of education and the criteria for becoming a senior official showed a positive relationship between education and leadership. The tradition of regarding education as one of the qualifications of leaders can be traced back thousands of years. This model of Chinese higher education institutions existed until the end of the 19th century (Meng, 2017).

Influenced by the American university model, China's new education reform legislation was implemented in 1922. By 1949, there were 205 higher education institutions in China, including 124 public universities and colleges, 21 missionary universities and colleges, and 60 private universities and colleges. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, all universities and colleges have become state institutions. Until the 1980s, the central government took overall higher education institutions and reorganised them according to the higher education system of the Soviet Union. Since then, with the rapid development of the social economy, the development of science and technology, and improved personal living standards, the government has realised that higher education is the most important foundation for long-term economic success and implemented a series of reformations (Luo, 2021).

## 2.5.2. Numbers of HEIs

By 2020, China had built the largest higher education system in the world (MOE, 2020). Statistics from the Ministry of Education of The People's Republic of China showed there were 2,956 ordinary and adult colleges and universities in China in 2019. Among them, 2,688 were colleges and universities (including 257 independent institutions), 1,265 general colleges and universities, and 1,423 colleges and universities (Vocational College). There are 828 graduate institutions in China. Figure 2.1 shows the different types of HEIs and the composition of the higher education institutions in China (MOE, 2018).

**Figure 2.1.** The Different Types of HEIs in China, (2016).



In order to further promote the quality and standard of China's higher education, in 2017, the 'First-class universities and disciplines of the world' was announced; the abbreviation is 'Double first class' universities (pinyin: Shuāng yī liú). It aims to ultimately build a number of world class universities and disciplines by the end of 2050, in an effort to make China an international higher education power. There are 137 'Double first class' universities in the first list, including 42 world-class universities (36 A-class universities, 6 B-class universities)

(MOE, 2017). Thus, these ‘Double first class’ universities represent the most cutting-edge and top higher educational institutions in China.

### **2.5.3. Numbers of Students in HEIs**

According to the latest census data released in 2021, the population with a higher education background is 218.36 million in China. Compared with 2010, the number of people with higher education background per one hundred thousand people increased from 8,930 to 15,467. The total number of students in higher education was 41.83 million in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). In the autumn of 2020, there were 9.6745 million undergraduate students and 1.1066 million graduate students who were enrolled in Chinese higher education (MOE, 2020).

Since the details of the latest census data have not been released, the numbers shown in Table 2.1 are from the previous reliable database in 2016. As is shown in Table 2.1, female students occupied more than half of the whole student number, except the percentage in Doctor’s Degree (38.63%) is lower than their counterparts. This table reveals the fact that Chinese women have made a certain degree of achievement in the pursuit of equality in education (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016).

**Table 2.1. The Number of Female Students by Different Types and Levels (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016).**

**Number of Female Students of Schools by Type and Level**

	Total	Male	Female Students		unit:person
			Number	Percentage	
1. Higher Education					
(1). Postgraduates	1981051	977941	1003110	50.64	
(2). Doctor's Degree	342027	209895	132132	38.63	
(3). Master's Degree	1639024	768046	870978	53.14	
2. Undergraduate in Regular HEIs	26958433	12797429	14161004	52.53	
(1). Normal Courses	16129535	7509969	8619566	53.44	
(2). Short-cycle Courses	10828898	5287460	5541438	51.17	
3. Undergraduate in Adult HEIs	5843883	2468517	3375366	57.76	
(1). Normal Courses	2686619	1071031	1615588	60.13	
(2). Short-cycle Courses	3157264	1397486	1759778	55.74	
4. Students Enrolled in Other Formal Programs					
(1). Master's Degree Programs for On-the-job Pers	581843	369384	212459	36.51	
(2). Web-based Undergraduates	6449329	3375544	3073785	47.66	

#### **2.5.4. The Higher Education Workforce**

In Chinese culture and language habits, all employees who are participating in teaching activities in higher education are called teachers. Regardless of the professional titles, 'teacher' is respected and generally welcomed by most people. Thus, 'teacher' will be used to refer to this group in the following part of this context. The term educational personnel refer to those who are working in higher education institutions but not engaged in teaching work, and these personnel are mainly administrative staff.

In 2020, there were 1.833 million full-time teachers in colleges and universities across the country (MOE, 2020). Table 2.2 shows the number of female educational personnel and full-time teachers in higher educational institutions. As the latest detailed data in 2020 has not been disclosed, this table was released in 2016. The number of female educational personnel and full-time teachers occupied almost half the number in these HEIs. The data from institutions providing postgraduate programmes were missing. In other types of HEIs, except the regular higher education institutions that offer degree programmes, female personnel and

teachers outweighed the number of male personnel and teachers (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016; MOE, 2016).

**Table 2.2. The Number of Female Educational Personnel and Full-time Teachers of HE (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016).**

**Number of Female Educational Personnel and Full-time Teachers of HE**

	Educational Personnel	of which: Female Educational Personnel		Full-time Teachers	of Which:Female Full-time Teachers		unit:person		
		Number	Percentage		Number	Percentage			
1. Institutions Providing Postgraduate Programs									
(1). Regular HEIs									
(2). Research Institutes									
2. Regular HEIs	2404784	1162408	48.34	1601968	788558	49.22			
(1). HEIs Offering Degree Programs	1750614	828921	47.35	1134030	538769	47.51			
of Which:Independent Institutions	164913	85104	51.61	123428	63257	51.25			
(2). Higher Vocational Colleges	652580	332643	50.97	466934	249258	53.38			
(3). Other Institutions	1590	844	53.08	1004	531	52.89			
3. Adult HEIs	43119	21847	50.67	25214	13740	54.49			
4. Other Non-government HEIs	22469	11667	51.92	10326	5280	51.13			

Despite such a large number of female teachers in higher educational institutions in China, women account for a relatively small proportion in senior leadership positions. By 2020, there were 59 ‘double first-class’ universities in China, but only three female presidents among them and they were from Shandong University, Central South University and Central University of Finance and Economics (MOE, 2020). According to the statistics on female educational personnel and full-time teachers of HE in 2019, the number and proportion of female teachers had an increase of 0.43% over 2018. With a large number of female teachers engaging in higher education every year, the demand for their future career planning and role models is imminent. Although the number and proportion of female leaders in colleges and universities has made considerable progress in recent years, they still face many problems compared with the international indicators promised by the Chinese government. The traditional role stereotypes and marginalisation in the appointment of female leaders in colleges and universities still exist (Liu, 2018).

### **2.5.5. The ‘Principal Accountability System’**

In Chinese higher education, the top chief executive and academic officer are the university presidents, who are also known as the headmasters. The headmaster is in charge of all affairs, which include the recruitment and appointment of school administrators and professors. Chinese universities are established, managed and led by the government, as an affiliate to the government. Therefore, the presidents of the universities are appointed directly by the government, and this system is called the ‘Principal Accountability System’, which is known as ‘The principal responsibility system under the leadership of the government’ and this system has been implemented since 1989. The principals or the presidents of the universities are responsible for dealing with the daily teaching and scientific research activities of the school and effective management of the school (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). The president is fully authorised to represent the school and is responsible for decision making, command, human resource and financial issues, as well as the core mechanism of the school leadership. When selecting the president of the university, the government values the political identity and academic status of the presidential candidates. The first criterion is that the candidate must be a member of the Communist Party of China. The second criterion is their academic ability, administrative capacity and management ability (Li, 2007; Wang, 2015). Faculty members in Chinese universities are subordinate to the administrative level, including the educational personnel and full-time teachers. The senior managers of the school are not only the school leaders but also officials. Since this system has been found to cause bureaucracy in universities, efforts have been made in recent years to get rid of the administrative in universities (MOE, 2010). The aim of the reform is to build a new relationship between government and universities which could be described as a relatively independent, interactive service, with mutual supervision and university autonomy.

### **2.5.6. Female Students in Higher Education**

Chinese universities have a shorter history compared with Western countries, and women have long been excluded from the higher education system. The first university in China was the Imperial University of Peking, which was established in 1898 (Wang, 2011). Since the beginning of the construction of the knowledge system, the authoritative and the builders of the system have been men. There will be some obstacles when women adapt and fit themselves into the existing educational systems (Yan, 2006; Yu, 2017). Since the reform and opening-up in China in the 1980s, significant achievements have been made for education, and the higher education has obtained outstanding achievement (Lu & Wu, 2007). With the rapid development of the higher education, there were 1.448 million female graduate students in 2019, accounting for 50.6% of all graduate students, with an increase of 2.7 % compared with 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020). Despite many years of development, some problems still exist in female students' higher education, which could be covered in the following four aspects.

First, the problem in women in higher education is not explicit, it is invisible. It seems to be commonplace in many cases when people talk about the education of females in China, they think female students are at a disadvantage. For example, regarding the teaching goal of higher education, although in the same educational system and on the same university campus, the same teachers pass on the knowledge of almost the same content; some surveys show that women's awareness of independent innovation is relatively weak. It was described that the female students have a competitive shortage, lack of vision, lack of insight and sense of mission. Perhaps there is a stereotype when people are evaluating the female students, but it reflects widespread prejudice against female undergraduates. Moreover, serious gender bias in professional learning exists. Some scholars have pointed out that the meaning of 'value science subjects and neglect liberal arts subjects' is the same as 'son preference' (men are superior to women). In some university campuses, the female PhD student is treated as

an ‘alien’, ‘alternative’ and ‘the third gender (or sex)’, who is faced with many bewilderments and undeliverable problems in both her life and study (Morley, 2014). Most of the female students are limited to choose majors like tourism management, etiquette service and tour guide, fashion show, image design, preschool education, home economics, and so on, in the higher education. All those majors are considered to be suitable for girls (Yan, 2006). Therefore, the problem is hidden behind the curtain and lies in people’s subconscious; it is rooted in their understanding and judgement of the world, which was established by the people through a long-time social practice.

Second, it is not just an educational issue, it is a social problem. People believe that as long as women and men are given the same right to receive education, they can try to obtain equal rights for development, thus achieving the equality between men and women in the field of education. But the reality is that quite a number of women, after graduating from their higher education, are still concentrated on specific jobs which are ‘femininised’ or ‘female-catered’, for example, office clerks, accountants, teachers, bank tellers, and so on. The ‘Employment Report of Chinese College Students in 2017’ issued by the Maikesi Research Institute (which is a higher educational data management and consulting professional company) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, show that the three most popular jobs for girls were accountants, teachers and nurses in 2017. These numbers are based on the two-year follow-up reports on the graduation of college students in 2012 and 2015; the former collected about 250,000 samples nationwide, while the latter collected more than 40,000 samples nationwide. They also reported that engaging in education, banking and nursing made most of the female graduates feel a sense of happiness (Chinajob, 2018). Another reason for the female students receiving higher education is mainly to become a good wife or good mother, because they think this will make their next generation better educated. Thus, what we could conclude from this case is that the equal right of receiving education does not mean the equal results of being educated. The factors that affect gender equality in education or solve the equality problem of gender education are far beyond the field of education, and it is actually a social

problem. Gender inequality in education is a reflection of many underlying social problems in the field of education (Yan, 2006).

Third, it is not only a realistic problem, but also a historical existence, which is rooted in the Chinese history. As previously mentioned in the Confucian culture of China, the subordination of women in China has a profound long history. Women in imperial and ancient China were restricted from participating in various realms of social reproduction and the view that men are superior to women is deeply rooted in Chinese people's minds. Besides, the stereotypes of being female often regard women as gentle, soft and emotional while men are more direct and practical, and they seem to be born to do housework and help their husbands (Deem, 2003; White et al., 2011). These traditional ideas and stereotypes also impede women's understanding of themselves and impede them from their development in terms of academic and job career. When choosing future jobs, female graduates still tend to choose a work environment that is more family friendly and beneficial to the growth of the next generation. They consider not only their future career development, but also about supporting their spouse's work and caring for their children's learning and development.

The fourth one, more importantly, is that people have limited knowledge about the gender theory and equality between men and women at the theoretical level. Since the introduction of the gender theory from the Western countries in the 1980s, people have a variety of understanding of gender equality (Yan, 2006). What is the equality of education between men and women? What is the image of an ideal woman? It is a strong woman with extraordinary workability or a good wife and a good mother. Can the standard of judging women by their being good wives and mothers in the old days be adapted to women at the present time? The criteria for the judgement are different and change over time, so the answer is unknown. These unavoidable problems must be addressed, and the dross left by strong traditional culture in women should be eliminated.

## **2.6. Summary**

This chapter summarises geography and population statistics and provides a brief history of China. It has provided an overview of Chinese education system, as well as the important aspects of women's status in China's higher education. The traditional culture is introduced to illustrate the profound impact in every perspective of gender issue. The specific literature and theoretical framework will be explained in detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three. Literature Review**

### **3.1. Introduction**

Considering its long history, rich cultural heritage, and profound economic and enterprise reform, China presents a very dynamic and complex leadership practice environment nowadays. While increasing efforts have been made on leadership research in recent years, many research studies have been conducted in terms of women's leadership, but less analytical attention has been paid to Chinese female leadership (Peus et al., 2015; Tsang et al., 2011). Women are still generally in the subordinate and deputy positions in leadership activities in the actual workplace (Wang et al., 2014). In the higher education (HE) context, although women serve as president and senior managers at universities and many women have played management roles, relatively few make a break through the so-called 'glass ceiling' into senior leadership (Sheng, 2009). More and more scholars have begun to draw attention to the research of women's leadership in the Chinese context; for example, Wang and Yu (2014) and Wang et al. (2014) focused on the female university leaders at Chinese universities; interviews and action research were conducted on female leadership in the educational field (Hu, 2009; Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2016; Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). The quantitative method was adopted to investigate the structural model and scale development of women's career success (Xiao & Luo, 2015); by using hypothesis testing, the effects of servant leadership on work-family balance was explored (Wang et al., 2016). Based on the literatures that have been reviewed, there is a fairly balanced usage of qualitative and quantitative methods. Each methodology has its advantages but does not provide both generalisable and informative data to generate knowledge with breadth and depth (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016).

Different streams of research spanning different geographic and cultural contexts exist within the literature on women and leadership in HE. In the Western community of scholars, the research based on gender theory and leadership theory in the field of education has a

deep foundation. One scholar whose work has been of particular influence, gaining significant global attention from the education field, is Morley (2013), who conducted a series of studies cooperating with scholars from different countries worldwide on some aspects of female leadership in higher education. For example, women leaders in the global academy (Morley, 2014), in Asian countries (Morley, 2016; Morley, 2017), and in African countries (Morley, 2019). The lack of women in senior positions indicates that women are under-represented in all decision-making levels. This means that the resources of the female workforce in colleges and universities are being under-utilised and have not been optimised. Although there is abundant evidence of this in the Western world, there is a dearth of research on the promotion of mid-career academic women in HE in China. In the UK context, White et al. (2011), Kandiko et al. (2018) and Morley (2018) had already conducted a series of influential studies that focus on mid-career academic women and the continual under-representation of women in HEIs (see section 3.4.2). The goal of this thesis is consequently to explore the career paths, experiences and aspirations of women in mid-career academic roles because that is a career stage where the ‘glass ceiling’ appears to present a barrier to further career progression. This thesis will also analyse the internal and external barriers and difficulties that present obstacles to their progression to senior leadership positions in higher education. Moreover, the concept of career capital is of great importance in people’s career path but not widely used in the educational research in China. Thus, this study aims to integrate and introduce this concept in the analysis of the mid-career academic woman’s career.

In this chapter, the analytical framework underpinning the research is outlined, and the empirical literature on which it is based is presented. There are four main sections in this chapter, which are the gender theory, women and leadership theory, then the concept of prestige and the research economy is examined, followed by the concept of career capital, including its definition and some of the corresponding empirical literature. The last section

is a summary of the preliminary investigation of barriers that mid-career academic women may encounter in HEIs.

### **3.2. Gender Theory**

The first and most fundamental theory of importance to the current research is gender theory. Compared to gender studies in Western cultures, gender studies started late in China and Chinese scholars have produced limited studies. Due to the short history of gender research in China, only a few academic institutions are aware of gender issues (Meng, 2017). Gender has a profound impact on the roles women perform in life, their lived experiences, aspirations, career choices and trajectories. Starting from gender theory helps to ensure that this research is grounded in the experiences of women. By giving attention to female scholars in Chinese higher education, this study places women and their unique gendered experiences at the centre of the analysis, contributing new insights to the extant literature. This section discusses how gender is defined and used in this study, then examines in greater depth the development of gender studies in China.

#### **3.2.1. Sex and Gender**

The terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ occur interchangeably in daily usage when people sign ‘male’ or ‘female’ on documents or assign such categories to people in conversation. However, in sociology, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are now understood to refer to different content areas. The definition of sex emphasises the differences between male and female in physiological components, like chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, reproductive systems, etc., while gender ‘refers to those social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts.’ (Lindsey, 2005). Therefore, gender can be viewed from a sociological perspective as a continuum of characteristics of a human being regardless of the biological sex.

The complexity of the theory and concept of gender in terms of social science and the context of human society, is an indispensable component when considering sociocultural systems and cultural particulars. In her landmark feminist manifesto, Simon de Beauvoir analysed the female status throughout history; she asserted that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ (cited in Butler, 1986, p. 36), and she also argues women’s subordination is due to the physiology of men and women but women’s contribution to the social production cannot be underestimated. Ortner (1996) agrees with De Beauvoir’s view on the oppression of females throughout history and presented a meticulous analysis of why women are seen as closer to nature. She answered this question by differentiating the problem into three levels, which are physiology, social role and psyche:

- 1) From the physiological view, women are given the responsibility to reproduce their offspring, which is perishable, while men have more energy to develop their imagination and create a civilisation which asserts their creativity externally and artificially through the medium of technology and symbols.
- 2) In the social role level, women were confined by their lactation processes and domestic family context because of the animal-like nature of children, as well as the infrasocial connotation of the domestic group being against the rest of society.
- 3) Although brought up by their mother to become a full-fledged member of the culture, boys should be guided by their father to accomplish their psyche and be ready for the adult society.

Therefore, the universal and pan-cultural fact is that the secondary status of women in society is due to in these cultures; women are seen as closer to nature than men, and men are seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of culture (Ortner, 1996). Similarly, as mentioned in section 2.4.1., culture has embedded invisible influence in gender topics in China and the gendered beliefs are shaped by culture. Women’s subordination is the consequence of thousands of years of Chinese feudal society and it made women have low

social status, such that a woman's honour depends on her husband's or son's social status (Wei, 2002). Although the status of women has been greatly improved in new China, promoting women's all-round development and gender equality has been a significant task that requires more efforts.

### **3.2.2. Gender Performativity**

Judith Butler, who is a philosopher and gender theorist, explores the relationship between power and the categories of sex and gender by examining the work of Simone de Beauvoir and other philosophers. She challenges the conventional notions of gender, according to which sex is biological while gender is culturally constructed and develops her theory of gender performativity. She argues that the terms 'gender' and 'sex' should be collapsed as they are both socially and culturally constructed, even though these two terms have been used by feminists extensively (Mikkola, 2008). She provides a brand-new view on dealing with gender identity and calls for people to trouble the categories of gender through performance. This idea of 'perform' gender shares some similarities with Goffman's self-presentation theory (Goffman, 2002). He compares interactions among people to the theatrical performances and dramaturgical analysis that in social interaction, people behave just like actors act before the audience; they offer their positive self-concepts and desired impressions whereas there is also a backstage where individuals can be themselves and drop their societal roles and identities (Goffman, 2002, p. 46).

In this respect, women would perform their 'gender' to the audience in different circumstances and show their identity through social interactions with individuals and groups. The theory of gender performativity was proposed in the 1990s and it has had a profound impact upon the way in which the humanities conceptualise gender, sexuality and power. Her notion of 'performativity' has been widely influential and to some extent, her refusal to recognise that gender is the product of the physiological gender body makes this

view controversial (Osborne, 2015). In traditional Chinese culture, women were required to help the husband and teach the children at home, while their husbands headed toward the path of an official career. The traditional Chinese woman should perform as a gentle, virtuous and family-centred wife or mother, which deprived their consciousness of the subject and the spirit of independence.

### **3.2.3. Gender Studies in China**

The gender studies in higher education in the Western world have been undertaken for decades, but the study of gender theory only began in 1993 in China. When the first ‘Chinese women and development seminar’ was adopted, the explanation of the word ‘gender’ by social gender theory interpretation aroused widespread concern. In the next few years, gender studies have been spread and developed rapidly and began to spread in the domestic academic field (Zeng, 2017). This topic was widely debated in the next few years, until from the end of the 1990s, the Chinese female scholars in many colleges and universities began to support the theory of gender, and began to write related articles and publications; some colleges and universities set up the Institute of Women’s Issues, held seminars, and set up relevant courses as well (Li, 2000; Liu, 2011). Since then, the social gender theory has gradually come to the stage of localisation. However, because of the late start, there is a considerable gap in the theoretical research of women. In the field of educational leadership and management, few studies discuss the wellbeing of females in Chinese higher education from a standpoint of gender theory (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). Hence, the need for gender identity studies through Chinese higher education has become demanding.

## **3.3. Leadership Theory**

Leadership research has received extensive attention around the world, and the current knowledge on leadership is primarily built upon studies situated in the Western context. This

literature has been criticised for perpetuating western masculinised notions of leadership (Morley, 2019). Since the 1970s, studies on gender and leadership have gradually increased to counter the prevailing masculine literature and to respond to women's increasing participation in the workforce and the importance of women having a role in leadership (Meng, 2017). However, women remain underrepresented in higher education leadership around the world, and while this issue has received much attention in Western literature, it is not well researched in China. Raising the need for research, studies also indicate that new gender stereotypes seem to be emerging in traditional cultures like China. Persistent and pervasive stereotypes caused by conscious and unconscious gender bias (Rhode, 2003) have prompted controversial debates on whether women have power as leaders and the advantages and potential of women leaders (Meng, 2017). Arguably, attention needs to turn to the precariousness of women's careers and their path to leadership, especially to understand factors that might be preventing women from gaining leadership roles. Before expanding on these points, first in this section leadership is defined and leadership theories are discussed. As empirical research on women's leadership in higher education in China is limited, this will be foregrounded by studies in Western contexts.

### **3.3.1. Definition of Leadership**

The issue of the definition of leadership has continued for centuries since Plato's questioning about the qualities that distinguish an individual as a leader (Jowett, 1901). Yet, people still have various views on the definition of leadership, which is a complex concept that comprises broad connotations. Northouse (2013) defined leadership as a 'process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal'. Leadership is a broad menu of behaviours, some appropriate to one environment but not another, and it is generally accepted that leadership is about influencing others (Krapfl & Kruja, 2015).

Bush and Glover (2014) suggested that there are three dimensions to conceptualise educational leadership. The first is leadership as influence, which stresses the intentional influence that is exerted by a leader(s) over other people in order to organise the whole group to achieve a common goal. Since the influence is neutral but fails to explain what goals or actions should be sought through this process, the second dimension is concerned with personal values which are firmly grounded into one's character, as well as self-awareness and moral capability. The third dimension is the vision, which is increasingly regarded as an essential component of effective leadership in recent years. Teachers and followers rely on leaders or principals to be visionary and provide a clear vision, but vision building is a hard work for leaders because of its innate complicated and sophisticated nature (Bush & Glover, 2014). Although there is no agreed definition of educational leadership, which is both subjective and arbitrary, many theories have been attempting to define leadership and the characters and traits of leaders. In general, leadership means the combination of vision, mission, direction and inspiration; it is a multi-dimensional mixture which could be defined through different approaches.

The concept and system of leadership were introduced from the Western context, and China had no relevant disciplines in ancient times. However, what the Chinese people have pursued since ancient times is a practical approach to govern the state and the social affairs. The ancient scholars mainly discussed the way of governing the country, which involve the theme of leadership. Thus, influenced by Chinese culture, leadership in the Chinese context means more than leading a group of people to achieve a common goal. Moreover, it includes noble morality and diligence, which are high moral characteristics and a positive working attitude and dedication. Leadership also means the ability to analyse and judge, to make decisions, coordinate and solve disputes, as well as the strong execution in practical work.

### **3.3.2. Leadership Stereotypes**

When we think ‘leader’, we think ‘male’ (Sinclair, 2005, p. 90). It has been hypothesised that leadership is defined according to normative masculinity (Binns & Kerfoot, 2011), with maleness seen as a career capital, and femaleness as a disadvantage (Morley, 2013). Fitzgerald (2011) believed that the focus on productivity, competitiveness, hierarchy, strategy, and the inalienable logic of the market renders senior higher educational leadership a masculine domain. Management and leadership have been constructed in a masculine way from the past to nowadays (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000). The ‘masculine ethic’ was part of the early image which elevates certain male traits that are necessary for effective management; for example, a strong attitude toward problem-solving; analytical ability to abstract and plan; the ability to give up personal and emotional factors in order to accomplish a task; a cognitive advantage in problem-solving and decision-making, and so on (Kanter, 1977). When women try to enter managerial positions, ‘male ethic’ is regarded as an exclusionary principle and the women managers are regarded as challengers to the gender stereotype. Male managers have an advantageous position in number, and the early management system is based on the various characteristics of men, so the number of women in the system established on this basis is bound to be disadvantageous.

From the discussions of leadership, none of the definitions explicitly refer to men, but leadership has been equated with masculinity traditionally; at least in business and on senior levels, the managerial jobs have been defined as a matter of instrumentality, autonomy, and result-orientation, which are not particularly much in line with what is broadly assumed to be typical for females (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000). The female was generally playing adjunct roles rather than the most senior positions in organisations. Higher education institutions have always been considered to be good places for implementing the equal rights for men and women, and the HE institutions created many new managerial positions, such as the quality assurance, community engagement and marketing managers to promote women entering senior leadership, but women have often found themselves in the ‘velvet

ghettos' (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009) of communication, finance and human resource management or languishing in the 'ivory basement' (Eveline, 2004; Morley, 2012). From the corporate sector, Ryan and Haslam (2005) explained how the 'glass cliffs' (which indicate women are often in an unpopular and unstable position in management areas) widely spread in the organisations, and how men and women are being treated differently for rewarding and unrewarding organisational tasks.

Those who emphasise gender differences are mainly concerned with psychological characteristics and social background, educational or vocational choices or different work orientations. Those who agree that men and women are similar in management and leadership argue from a sociology and structuralism perspective, for example, the organisation policy, the influence of organisation, and evaluation deviation. Another new perspective is to form the identity or subjectivity by communicating a micro and macro view and considering the cultural context at the same time; and to form the identity or subjectivity by acting on individual cultural forces, which is also an important factor in sustainable cultural construction (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000). However, the literature suggesting that women and men have innately different managerial dispositions could be highly problematic, as it emphasises some women's highly developed skills like communication, which is innate (Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Muhr (2011) and Billing (2011) commented that the dualism of leadership as masculine or feminine should be critiqued and more sophisticated frames of analysis should be asked, such as in what sense do work practices and norms still reflect the life situations and interests of men?

In the report from HESA in the UK, in the academic year 2019/20, female staff accounted for 48% of full-time staff and 66% of part-time staff. Among academic staff there were more males than females (118,865 and 104,305, respectively). Of professors, 28% were female in 2019/20. This has increased by one percentage point year-on-year since 2013/14. It is obvious that there are great differences in gender in different occupations, with men

occupying more academic positions while women occupied a larger number of part-time positions in the higher education institutions (HESA, 2020). Moreover, the data from the Royal Society (2015) indicated that in 2015, there were only two women out of 43 mid-career scientists awarded Royal Society University Research Fellowships, which was very controversial. From the research by Morley in 2013, the enrolment of women in higher education has increased sixfold during the past forty years, but this good news ends there as the women students have not been matched by growth in the number of women in senior leadership roles in universities (Morley, 2013). In addition, she also conducted similar research studies in Asian countries (Morley, 2016; Morley, 2017) and in African countries (Morley, 2019). The lack of women in senior positions means that women are under-represented in all decision-making forums around the world and some of the important skills and current human resources are being under-utilized (Morley, 2013). She argued that ‘women might be entering the elite professions and social spaces, but the senior positions appear to remain resistant to feminization’ (Morley, 2011, p. 227). Even in countries with diverse gender equality policies and legislation, the prevailing pattern of men in senior leadership positions is obvious. For example, in Australia, women constitute 40% of the vice-chancellors but only 18% of the vice-chancellors (Bagilhole & White, 2011). In the 27 EU countries, the 2012 HEFCE Report states that in 2010-11 most academics were still male (57%), and female academics were concentrated in less senior roles, which involved a strong vertical segregation in women’s academic careers.

There is a long history in higher education development and their pursuit of gender equality in the above countries, and various research studies have been conducted to improve the current situation. Comparatively, the establishment of the higher education system in China is relatively late. As discussed in section 2.5.1., China's education reform was influenced by the American university model and reorganised the higher education institutions according to the system of the Soviet Union (Luo, 2021). Therefore, those experiences and efforts on

pursuing gender equality of Western countries are worth learning and practising in the Chinese higher education context.

### **3.3.3. Women in Leadership**

The general interest in new concepts of leadership seems to be more or less increasing as more women enter leadership. This increasing interest in feminine leadership has caused scholars to express different views on the difference between the sexes, which are explained in gender-stereotypical ways. Gender studies have become a topic of growing interest in the field of organisational research. As Tomàs et al. (2010) maintained in their review of the subject, gender continues to have a central importance as a category for analysis in the study of organisations. Research studies of the so-called ‘glass ceilings’ revealed the multiple barriers to women’s progress on the organisational ladder in terms of the invisible or tacit (Powell, 1999). Different viewpoints and theoretical backgrounds are taken into account in the works that attempt to study the underlying causes of this phenomenon in the context of universities (Bacchi, 2001).

Among many factors, misrecognition and gender bias are two important causes of this phenomenon. The misunderstanding of what it means to be female and how to define the qualities for managerial jobs can produce at least two forms of prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The first prejudice is women have potential disadvantages in leadership roles compared with men, and the second one is that the subordinates or followers have less favourable comments on the actual leadership behaviour of the women leaders. Therefore, the selection of a certain leadership role which is determined by a series of standardized and prioritized qualifications is very unfriendly to women because of the previously mentioned misrecognition (Morley, 2013). Likewise, the dominant leadership level tends to ‘clone’ themselves and appoints in their own image unintentionally in order to minimise the risk (Gronn & Lacey, 2006). It is likely to occur in the organisations where the assessments are

based on obscure criteria and confidential evaluation processes, so to a certain extent transparency of the processes is needed to minimise the potential bias.

As these ideas have repeated the dualism of leadership as masculine or feminine, a more sophisticated frame of analysis is needed here to form the identity or subjectivity by acting on individual factors. In the HE institutions, the female educational leaders are portrayed as committed to social justice, relationships, and instruction. This ideological bias leads to an undertheorised equation between women and the female, between female and feminist models of behaviour, and between a desired style and the actually exhibited style. There is some naturalising gender binary buried in all this rhetoric that locates the female scholars in highly contradictory and antithetical positions (Tomas et al., 2010). A kind of comprehensive approach is needed to differentiate sex and gender, as these two words can neither be equated nor be merged into one word to adapt to this context of the organisational framework, but one can provide analysis to emphasise the notion of gender as a social construct that directly affects the essence of organisations.

Masculinity and femininity are constantly changing through culture and history, and it depends on the meanings ascribed to them. ‘Arguably, masculinity is performed by women as well as by men’ (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000, p. 146), and ‘women will be perceived as successful leaders when they perform more ‘masculine’ characteristics’. Thus, there is no strong polarisation of masculinity and femininity. Although the Western history of philosophy has contrasted male and female by using opposite traits, such as rationality/emotionality, objectivity/subjectivity, and culture/nature, the male in the senior positions may also be featured as caring for the subordinators, relations-orientated, recognising the importance of feelings, and so on. As the masculinity of management and leadership is diminishing, the literature on this topic needs to be improved and to be much more sensitive to it. Moreover, the female leaders do not need to confine themselves to the framework of feminine-oriented leadership style or being shackled by the perception that

they will be considered to be too masculine. Different leadership styles are welcomed, and they will play their roles in the organisations properly. The feminine leadership should be put in a broader and more critical context rather than discussing the gender labelling in relation to leadership.

### **3.3.4. Research on Women Leadership in Higher Education**

The theory of modern management has fully affirmed the leadership ability of women. Women are effective leaders as they often have a novel and unique perspective to seek change. Women also have their unique talents, ideas, attitudes, and methods; they have the ability to lead the organisation to change to adapt to the needs of the new times. Compared with male leaders who have their unique gender advantages, women generally have more communicative ability, cooperation and mobilisation ability. Moreover, female leaders have particularly prominent advantages in dealing with work objectives, the treatment of specific issues and interpersonal relationships (Hu, 2009). The lack of women in senior positions indicates that at all decision-making levels, women are under-represented. This means that the resources of female workforce in colleges and universities are being under-utilised and have not been optimised (Morley, 2013). The under-representation of female scholars reflects the continued inequalities between men and women, and also this is a wastage of human resource in higher education institutions.

Nowadays, it is common that women serve as senior leaders in higher education in China. Many women have played the management roles and taken the responsibilities of promoting the construction and development of universities. In recent years, analytical attention has been given to women's leadership to understand the phenomenon of leader emergence (Peus et al., 2015). However, scholarly work in the area of women's leadership in China is still limited (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). Only a very small number of empirical studies have examined the nature and leadership practices of the principalship and even fewer

studies have focused on female principals as a specific category of research (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010).

Among all the articles on the topic of women leadership in China, Wang and Shirmohammadi (2016) provided a helpful summary of empirical literature and methods that was instrumental in the development of this thesis. It is a scoping study that provides a holistic and balanced picture of female leadership in China from all kinds of literatures, as well as a clear guide of the literatures that related to the topic. Based on this paper, among 332 articles related to the topic, the authors narrowed down to 30 articles which are highly qualified and relevant to female leadership in the Chinese context. The conclusion is that the study of women leadership in China is limited and is still not part of the mainstream (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). The authors call for more research attention to the intricacies of Chinese social and business environments and to examine how they might have affected women's advancement to leadership positions, or the way women leaders interact with different environments.

The article by Wang and Shirmohammadi (2016) helps readers clarify the clues about the related publications, and some of the research they refer to is instructive for the study of this topic. In terms of the gender effect on women's leadership, two research studies that adopted the qualitative research method were significant (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). One focused on the experiences of women leaders in Chinese higher education (Tsang et al., 2011) and the other concentrated on female principals in the elementary education stage (Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). Tsang et al.'s (2011) study on five female university leaders identified that male-dominated relationships and social activities were particularly unfavourable to women's promotion. Compared with male leaders, these female leaders paid more attention to good interpersonal relationships and showed more personal interest in the welfare of their subordinates. The second study by Zhong and Ehrich's (2010) drew upon semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis to explore two dimensions of leadership

practices used by exemplary principals in the background of education reform. Two female principals were interviewed and they found that female leaders may be more effective than male leaders in creating a harmonious working environment, winning loyalty from followers and finding win-win solutions. These two studies reflect that the quality of the gentleness of women constitutes the institutional expectations and norms of women leaders; the Chinese women's leadership style and practice were largely restricted by Chinese workplace cultural norms.

Some scholars pay attention to the group portrait description and the investigation of female leaders in Chinese universities. Generally speaking, the female leaders in universities have disadvantages compared with their male colleges. According to Wang et al. (2014), their study of 39 universities within Project 985 indicates that there have been some active female top leaders on the stage of higher education in China. However, there are only 42 female leaders in those universities, and the whole group is featured as being aged, high academic and education background, low leadership percentage, more deputy positions, more party leadership and dominated by internal promotion. Meanwhile, by using the Curriculum Vitae research method, Wang and Yu (2014) analysed the resumes of 7,796 top-level university leaders at 1,166 Chinese universities. They reached a similar conclusion, there are insufficient female leaders in higher education institutions. Zhao (2007) examined the changing status of women faculties through an analysis of statistics on China's universities from 1994 to 2004, which provided an overview of women leadership in the international perspective. Furthermore, compared with their male counterparts, the highest degree of female leaders is mainly in the domestic universities, and the proportion of female leaders who obtained a degree from the higher level of domestic universities is lower. In respect of studying abroad and overseas experience, the women still have disadvantages in comparison with their male counterparts. In terms of the limitation of research methods, these studies used the second-hand data that were collected from the large-scale or national database, rather than collecting the information first-hand.

Considering the different research methods, most of the research studies employ the qualitative research method, for example, interviews and action research (Hu, 2009; Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2016; Zhao, 2007; Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). However, these qualitative studies have either had a limited number of participants, or lack of face-to-face interaction with the research objects. In addition, there was limited research focused on the quantitative method. Those studies include Xiao and Luo (2015), who investigated the structural model and scale development of women's career success. Some other scholars tested the effects of servant leadership on work-family balance by using hypothesis testing, but this survey was directed at the field of human resources (Wang et al., 2016). Thus, there is lack of publications that provide enough resource and reflection on the results in terms of quantitative research. Most of these quantitative studies were from the business or human resources background, and they did not pay attention to the teachers in higher education as the research object; instead, they tended to analyse the data from national statistics. Therefore, more empirical studies using mixed methods research to generate knowledge with breadth and depth are needed.

### **3.4. Prestige Economy**

In higher education, female scholars are not only influenced by the globalised neoliberalism that is experienced by all academics but are also expected to fulfil their responsibilities according to gender expectations, such as teaching, administrative service and research responsibilities (Phillips et al., 2022). Characterised by a traditional, hierarchical, and selective culture, academia is built as a highly institutionalised environment (Bomert & Leinfellner, 2017). Blackburn (2017) argues that academia was founded on patriarchal, imperial, and colonial values that construct and maintain gendered roles and regulations, which have been proposed to disadvantage women. This is partly due to the construction and operation of academic institutions, which are committed to giving neutrality to these specific processes and legitimising them (Blackburn, 2017; Göktürka & Tülübaş, 2021).

Driven by the desire for internationalisation and advancement of higher education in China, universities are paying more attention to visible and measurable research achievements and these achievements play an increasingly important role in a person's career and advancement to senior leadership. This section mainly focuses on the reasons behind this phenomenon and how academic motivation and prestige interweave with the prestige and research economy. It is hoped that this will bring a fresh lens to the study of women's leadership in higher education in China. A model of academic motivation by Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) is introduced to explain how intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors affect and interact with each other. Studies on the research economy are also reviewed in this part.

### **3.4.1. Definition of Prestige Economy**

'Economy' is the creation, transformation and realisation of value, and human economic activity is the activity of creating, transforming and realising the value to meet the needs of human material and cultural life. Simply, the economy is the management of materials, which include production, savings, exchange, and distribution, by different agents (Munim & Schramm, 2018). The 'prestige economy' was originally used by anthropologists to study in various cultures, when some behaviour could not be explained by the operation of money, markets or subsistence economies (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). English (2005) uses 'prestige economy' to describe a collaboration of people's beliefs, values and behaviours. In academic work, the prestige economy is estimated through indicators such as publication rates, first/last (depending on the field) author status, and editorial role, etc. These indicators are mainly research-related rather than teaching-related. English (2005) compared the concept of the prestige economy with that of the monetary economy and pointed out that these two notions are interrelated with each other and sometimes the prestige can be 'cashed' (Kandiko et al., 2018).

For instance, in many cultures the person was endowed with prestige when they gave others gifts. The legitimacy and some degree of autonomy with the monetary economy were given to the gift giver through some procedures of the prestige economy (Allen & Parsons, 2006). An important theme in anthropology is the exchange of prestige between individuals and other economic bodies, and the values associated with the accumulation, giving and acceptance of all the different forms of prestige (Carrier, 2012). Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic capital', which means 'how one is valued by others in terms of esteem', provides a hint of interpretation of the 'prestige economy', and 'Bourdieu's work illuminated how matters of 'taste' or 'distinction' are arbitrarily coded by certain groups of people' (Kandiko et al., 2018, p. 535).

In contemporary times, it is often men who have more power and influence, and the male undoubtedly has the ability to appreciate and acquire differentiated things as a mechanism for gaining social power. It is easy to understand how the mechanism benefits men with prestige and disadvantages the female scholars from a worldwide perspective. Besides, the concept of the prestige economy is also relevant to the academic environment in which social and cultural capital is generated and exchanged, and the academic recognition of a scholar can bring tangible and intangible returns (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). Based on Bourdieu's (1984) influence on the analysis of academic work, Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) explored several significant ideas on academic motivation, which have enlightened the researcher's ideas about the motivation and research economy nowadays and helped to develop the following structure of the writing. They proposed key ideas on academic motivation which will be explained in detail in the following parts and provided a comprehensive guide to the motivation and prestige from different perspectives.

### **3.4.2. Motivation and Prestige**

It is an international and widely recognised trend that higher education systems and individuals are under increasing pressure to be more productive (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). The academic work of many scholars involves a wider range of activities, especially highly applied research that is more closely linked to industry (Molas-Gallart et al., 2002). Research institutes in the United Kingdom and the United States have paid considerable attention to the structure of pay and remuneration. There are some doubts about the validity of the provisions already implemented, and some people believe that they have not had a beneficial impact (Guest & Clinton, 2007). However, there is preliminary evidence that some academic behaviour is not directly or strongly influenced by financial motivations. Many scholars continue to volunteer for activities without financial reward, such as external inspection, journal review and committee work. Moreover, some disciplines, especially the humanities, have been reluctant to participate in generating income (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011).

In the UK context, a growing strand of research has begun to focus on the papers directed to mid-career academic women and the prestige economy, as well as to the continual under-representation of women in HEIs (Morley, 2018). For example, Dean et al. (2009), Morley (2018), White et al. (2011) and Morley (2018) conducted a series of influential studies. Inheriting the essence of these, Kandiko et al. (2017) focused on whether women academics perceived prestige and esteem to be gendered concepts, and whether they felt that this might be a factor in career progression. Despite these studies that have been conducted over the years, gender inequality in most higher education institutions of the world has hardly changed substantially, and men still hold a majority of the positions in British institutions of HE. Nearly 80% of professors in the UK higher education system are men, and most women are in deputy, part-time or non-managerial roles (Kandiko et al., 2017).

In the Equality in Higher Education Staff Statistical Report of year 2020, 54.6% of staff working in UK higher education were women and 45.4% were men, among which 54.4% of academic managers, directors and senior officials were men compared to 45.6% women. In contrast, 54.7% of professional and support staff managers, directors and senior officials were women. Among professional and support staff there was a clear gender divide in many occupational groups, such as administrative and secretarial occupations (79.6% women) and skilled trades occupations (77.6% men) (ECU, 2020). The situation seems to have been more friendly to women in the past few years, but there are still some inequalities. Some feminist researchers believed that this dominance of males is the result of the new rise of the competitive, neoliberal and masculine culture of higher education (Morley, 2014), and also, more attention should be drawn on the culture and the organisation system.

### **3.4.3. Academic Motivation Factors**

Reviewing the literature on academic motivation, there are mainly two types of driving forces, internal and external. The external factors include the tenure, promotion, performance-related pay, travel allowance, payment of incidental departmental and professional expenses, assistance and privileges. The internal motivations include helping students, a sense of achievement when seeing their students make progress, solving problems, and the satisfaction when interacting with students, most of which are student-related (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). Importantly, the literature shows that the intrinsic motivation is more important, as it relates to the opportunities for learning and increasing skills and knowledge, as well as the academics' own choice and a clear understanding of their career path. In addition, the scholars have a preference for autonomy and independence; to be more specific, they would like to make achievement through their own efforts (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). Among them, Robinson (1996) elaborated on five motivation-related conditions: the inherent satisfaction of the job itself; peer review and quality standards; multiple career paths to ideal positions; the ability to take risks with limited penalties; and

an environment of trust and goodwill. It should be noted that bureaucracy and the control system can antagonise the intrinsic motivation of teachers.

The new trend of higher education has been discussed in the context of its political and economic environment, and the traditional values of higher education have been challenged by businesses and enterprises (Barnett, 1994; Shattock, 2008). This new trend in higher education is due to the rise of corporate approaches (Deem et al., 2007). The old concept of the positioning of academics that they should be ‘bureau professionals’ in publicly-funded and socially-oriented universities has been challenged (Ferlie & Andresani, 2009). The use of knowledge in exchange for economic benefits runs counter to the traditional beliefs that knowledge should be free. Thus, some scholars believe that one of the functions of academic work is to destroy the economic value of intellectual capital (Fuller, 2007). If academic motivation and freedom of action are closely related, then the nature of the academic environment and the relationship between individuals and the environment around them are very important. The higher education practitioners may be affected by their surroundings. As people who value income, professional and social welfare, they should take this as a good opportunity to demonstrate their ability, not an imposition.

There are economies operating in academia that could be used to explain contradictory behaviours. First of all, people's collectivity and discipline should be understood when analysing academic motivation in depth. Self-identity and collective recognition in academia are both important for research and teaching. The most significant factor for an organisation is discipline and many scholars have emphasised the importance of discipline. Klein (2001, p. 273) claims that they have ‘attained enormous influence over the organisation and production of knowledge’. For Henkel (2000, p. 15), a discipline ‘provides the language in which individuals understand themselves and interpret their world’. Becher (1989) viewed communities and disciplines as ‘tribes and territories’. Bourdieu (1984) has elaborated on the relationship between academic identity and knowledge and power. He described ‘habitus’

as ‘a system of shared dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations and actions’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 279). Here, he linked the individual to the social context. Another concept that exists is capital, which exists in economic, cultural and social contexts. Bourdieu (1984) also claims that ‘the status of disciplinary groups varies in relation to the capital to which they lay claim, and this applies at an individual level as well’ (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011, p. 403).

Bourdieu’s capital-field-habitus framework provides an interpretive perspective of *capital*, *field* and *habitus* to examine career trajectories and the factors that could impact subjective career experiences of different groups (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu described *habitus* as ‘a disposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 214, cited in Jayashree et al., 2021). It reflects acquired assumptions and behaviours that are internalised through early socialisation experiences, especially in the family environment, as well as other influences, such as education and the media (Joy et al., 2018). *Habitus* defines the method by which an individual recognises various capital values in a specific field, and it is considered the basis of leadership development. Bourdieu believes that although *habitus* has an essentially durable quality, it can be changed or re-created when an individual move to an unfamiliar field or is no longer suitable for the field. *Field* reflects ‘a social space in which players are positioned with given resources’ in Bourdieu’s framework (Glover et al., 2016, p. 27), and the players obtain legitimacy through shared rules.

#### **3.4.4. The Model of Academic Motivation**

Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) put forward their model to explain how the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors affect and interact with each other (see Figure 3.1). It links together three important ideas: academic work, prestige economy and monetary economy. As mentioned previously, ‘academic work’ refers to the outcomes or achievements of work, ‘prestige economy’ is the system of valuing and exchange of a range of capital, and the

‘monetary economy’ refers to the financial context. Bourdieu’s (1984) idea of habitus is at the centre in this diagram. The scholar is inevitably always in a tension because they have to keep themselves in balance with all the norms in these three circles. As noted in the economies operating in academia that can be used to explain contradictory behaviours, many academics have a priority of loyalty, which is their discipline first, and then their department, and lastly their institution.

**Figure 3.1.** *A Model of Academic Motivation (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011, p. 405).*

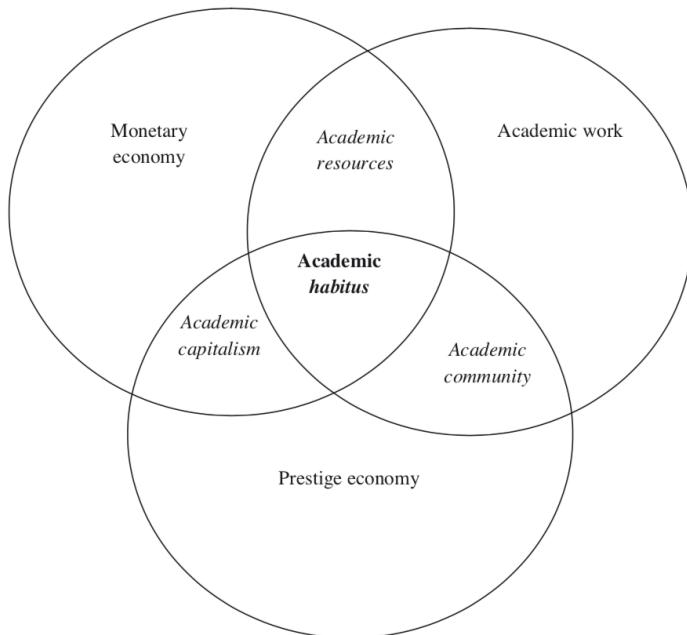


Figure 1. A model of academic motivation.

### 3.4.5. Research Studies on Motivation and Prestige

In a report that focused on the career strategies of mid-career academic women in the UK, Kandiko et al. (2018) found that female academics are motivated by diverse factors. Their findings build on previous research by Coate and Kandiko (2016), which similarly explored the gendered nature of the ‘prestige economy’ in UK universities. Taken together, the

findings show prestige is an important element in women's careers, but other factors are less valued by the institutions. Those who underestimated the prestige even seemed to be unpleasant when considering self-promotion. Besides, two key points should be highlighted in their findings. First, women do not necessarily oppose all aspects of the prestige economy of academia. Second, teaching behaviour is widely regarded as non-prestige. The respondents generally believed that the high-quality, high-value publications and large grant revenues constituted the prestige of the universities. Invited keynote speeches at international conferences, editing journals and supervising doctoral students are also specific indicators of personal prestige as an academic.

However, not all income-related activities are considered prestigious; for example, the income from teaching behaviour is less prestigious than research-related income. So the teaching behaviour is widely regarded as the least prestigious activity among all. In addition, many respondents in these research studies said their institutions attached importance to monetary income above everything else (Coate & Howson, 2016; Kandiko et al., 2018). This is likely to lead to their lack of confidence in the success of their future academic career. Similarly, to some extent gender biases can also have negative effects on prestige-related behaviours, such as if the achievements of some women are not always noticed by others, they may feel that this is a kind of discrimination. It also happens to people with ethnic minority backgrounds who lack the motivation to participate and are reluctant to promote themselves. It is frustrating that many women find that the factors that motivate them at work are the least likely to be recognised and rewarded. Women sometimes have conflicting feelings about prestige and reward, especially if they can increase prestige and reward on the one hand, and they want to depreciate its importance on the other hand (Coate et al., 2015).

From the angle of prestige economy, Coate et al. (2015) also analysed gender inequality in their research. They referred to a case study of an institution in the Republic of Ireland, and

they explored how prestige affects the gender issues through four topics (which were homosociality; non-transparency of criteria; academic workload balance; and self-promotion). From the result of the investigation, gender stereotypes are unavoidably mentioned when discussing organisational culture, and it reflects a lack of transparency in academic promotion (Haslanger, 2008). These might have a negative impact on performance. In addition, at the same level of academic achievement, female scholars are less confident than their male counterparts, and they are reluctant to self-promote in the competition for the same position with the male scholars (Coate & Howson, 2016). Therefore, it is far from enough to only focus on how to help them; it is also necessary to focus on how to change their perception of their ability and all the internal and external factors.

### **3.4.6. Research Economy**

Research economy is an important notion which underpins the topic of motivation and prestige. The ‘knowledge economy’ has become a dominant concept within the universities in the Western world, and the new model of this economy is a hybrid of industry and research, which comprises knowledge production, commodification and marketisation (Bastalich, 2010; Morley, 2018). Concerning higher education in the UK, the HE management programmes are to some degree over-reliant on performance measurement, auditing and regulation, which have an external impact on the environment and culture of these institutions. For example, the criteria or the standards for the measuring are mostly based on the outcomes of educational activities, which might lead to a competitive and results-oriented atmosphere within the HEIs (Fletcher et al., 2007). Morley (2018) argued that scholars are now forced to consider their teaching and research as marketable commodities in these marketised and corporatised universities. Encouraging the higher education institutions to be research-focused and teaching-oriented is a good way to attract talents and can also be used to stimulate the existing internal environment. Internal staff and new academics can work together to improve the overall quality of the institution, so that they

can attract external funding more easily (Fletcher et al., 2007). Thus, the next part will draw attention to how the research culture turns to productivity, and how the entire research production process works.

### **3.4.7. Research Culture Turns To Productivity**

The hypothetical basis of ‘knowledge economy’ comes from political and economic fields, higher education, social philosophy and political philosophy, so this is a multidisciplinary intersection. The success of scholars in the knowledge-based economy will depend on having appropriate personal capital, which includes their research skills, training and networking, and the ability to use such capital effectively (Fletcher et al., 2007). A considerable number of women enter higher education largely because of the flexibility of academic work in the HEIs so that they think it is easier to take care of their families and manage their domestic issues. This phenomenon is not uncommon in different research studies, which is an important factor affecting the development of women in their career path. If women are more willing than men to enter academia or research, they would aware of the capital of research more than their male peers. It can be inferred that the decline in academic capital adversely affects women’s habits and has a greater impact than on men’s habits. For instance, in Fletcher’s (2007) research, many women showed their anxiety about the new strategies of the universities to promote participation in research because their research capital levels were low, and also their lack of confidence when facing more competitive circumstances. It is conceivable that a pleasant research culture can play an important role in serving the disadvantages that are generated by the lack of research capital. However, as described above and in the example, women are considered inadequate in this regard.

A scholar’s involvement in a university research programme requires research funding, but many women do not have such conditions because of their entry routes. It is unreasonable

for universities to fail to help women researchers accumulate reasonable research capital, especially from the perspective of management. Loss of these women's human resources, as well as management resources, are a waste of research capital, and will also lead to a low productivity of universities. This is exactly what the higher education institutions do not want to see in this era of knowledge economy. Besides, in the current market-oriented knowledge economy, the research environment and individual research capital are incorporated into the framework of the entire market economy. In this process, the academic workforce transforms the resources that they occupy and puts them into the managed production process and waits for the benefits. These commodities can be specifically publications, research results, and so on, to meet the requirements of the 'consumers'. Beyond these, research is an important task for scholars, because in contemporary universities, research often offers better prospects for promotion and reward than teaching. Many scholars have also found that it brings material rewards and great spiritual enjoyment. However, these conditions are not very favourable to the female scholars, because all-day working has different social impacts on women and men. Women tend to have greater family responsibilities; they may not be able or desire to adopt a male-style work model; and many women indicate that family responsibilities have a greater impact on their professional competence than men. They also suffer from the role overloaded, multiple roles (Li, 2018), and conflicting responsibilities (West, 2014). Fenton (2003) believes that the dividing line between high-status research and low-status teaching is even more detrimental to women, because these women generally devote more time than men to administrative responsibility and family care, despite the nominal equal form of time distribution. He also argues that the industrialisation of higher education has led to a good working environment which is competitive and conducive to masculinised behaviour, but most women feel uncomfortable and resistant.

In summary, the marketisation of academic research in universities and the use of time or accounting mechanisms in management will affect the individual's time allocation to the

official work time. Men generally have more leisure time after work, which is just the time to socialise, and it may bring benefits for their research capital. Women, however, are more likely to spend their spare time doing non-research work, such as dealing with household chores and some domestic affairs. In the study on the UK new research economy, a story was related about a female respondent from a university, who had been working on a subject for many years and was marginalised when she was not invited to write a related new book and include it in a joint publication, but her colleagues were not deliberate, only simply forgotten her (Fletcher et al., 2007). These social factors and this forgetting mean that women feel they are excluded from participating in the research process. These references were all from the Western setting, and although the same phenomenon is commonly seen in the Chinese higher educational context, no previous research has discussed the research economy in Chinese universities. Therefore, combining this concept with the mid-career academic women's experience in Chinese higher education will be an innovation of this thesis.

### **3.5. Career Capital**

Career capital refers to the skills and competencies an individual needs to be successful in his or her work and career. It consists of three ways of knowing, which are 'knowing how', 'knowing why' and 'knowing who' (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). Skills and knowledge are regarded as key personal assets that accumulate over time. The theory of career capital with the three ways of knowing could be regarded as a framework to understand how changing conditions affect individuals' knowledge, skills and career possibilities (Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Kanstrén, 2021). According to the research on careers in higher education in China, higher educational institutions and academics themselves pay less attention to planning and designing a career (Dai et al., 2018; Li, 2021). While professional development in higher education has been discussed in most Western countries (Fabrizi et al., 2020), professional development of academic staff, especially female scholars, has long been disregarded in the

Chinese context. Thus, the concept of career capital is new in the Chinese educational field. This section discusses the definition of career capital and the three ways of knowing. The research on career capital is also introduced in this section, focused on Western contexts and what can be derived from studies in China.

### **3.5.1. Definition of Career Capital**

The concept of career capital was formed in the 1990s, and its rudiment is career competencies, which as a theory has been developed and improved after integrating the elements of ‘capital’ (not limited to human capital) (Qing et al., 2015). Specifically, career capital is the capital or ‘all non-financial resources’ recognised by the external labour market, and it is formed through learning and accumulating professional knowledge, skills and experience in the process of an individual’s career (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). Career capital is composed of human capital, psychological capital and social capital (Zhang, 2020). As an individual continually invests in their career throughout their life, career capital is not fixed, it is accrued over time (Yao, 2013). The process of career capital accumulation can be conscious or unconscious, occurring throughout a person’s life, it is a largely unknown interaction begins between the individual and their social environment. In the process of personal, educational and career development, this interaction leads to a constantly changing but still recognisable and partially stable capital portfolio, which individuals can use to achieve personal goals (Iellatchitch et al., 2003). By mid-career, academic women’s career trajectories are likely to have resulted in a multitude of interactions within the academic environment and exposure to experts, potentially creating abundant career capital resources, making this a particularly important concept in the present study.

### **3.5.2. Three Ways of Knowing**

According to the ‘intelligent career framework’, there are three dimensions of knowing, which are knowing why, knowing how and knowing whom (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). Human capital corresponds to ‘knowing how’, which refers to the resources, such as education background and the employee’s ability; corresponding to ‘knowing why’, psychological capital refers to positive psychological states, such as self-efficacy, optimism, self-confidence and abilities when facing difficulties; corresponding to ‘knowing who’, social capital refers social networks and to the effective resources established with internal and external stakeholders (Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Zhang, 2020). These three ways of knowing are of great importance to understanding the concept of career capital.

Specifically, knowing-how career capital includes technology, concept and interpersonal skills, professional skills and special knowledge to form professional experience. Jokinen et al. (2008) hold the view that, unlike human capital, career capital with ‘knowing-how’ emphasises that career resources could be transferred through organisational or even career boundaries. In other words, ‘knowing-how’ career capital has a certain transferability, whether in an existing organisation or during the transformation of an organisation, it helps individuals cope with a variety of challenges from their career trajectory and enhances the possibility of individuals’ career success (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Jokinen, 2010).

‘Knowing-why’ involves ability, purpose, motivation, self-confidence and evaluation of the career path (Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). It relates to personal motivation and self-evaluation, which provides the individual with a sense of purpose and job identity, and it also relates to the confidence in pursuing the individual’s ideal career path. Relevant studies have pointed out that individuals with high self-evaluation are more likely to achieve career success (Wang & Sun, 2012). The reason may be that these individuals are driven by internal motivation, and they find it easy to accept challenging tasks. Therefore, they are more likely

to obtain higher organisational rewards, such as promotion opportunities and salary promotion.

‘Knowing-whom’ career capital relates to the career-relevant networks and contacts (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). It exists within the organisation and outside, and it includes business-related contacts, such as customer relationships, and professional and personal social connections, such as friends (Parker & Arthur, 2000). It is closely related to more and more literatures on social capital, which refers to the assets embedded in and acquired through the relationship network. Knowing-whom career competencies reflect ‘the attachments, relationships, reputation, sources of information and mutual obligation that people gather as they pursue their careers’ (Inkson & Arthur, 2001, p. 51). ‘Knowing-whom’ capital follows the social resource theory, which assumes that individuals gain advantages by accessing or using their social networks to obtain significant resources, such as career development (Lin, 1999). Taylor (2007) found that the creation of social capital is strongly affected by cultural differences. In the Chinese context, networking (guanxi) is a similar concept, which is a unique factor for career success as it affects individuals’ upward mobility. Many studies have reinforced the importance of having networks for women leaders’ career success, but women leaders tend to have limited access to social networks compared with their male counterparts; consequently, they often had less information and more difficulty in forming alliances (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016).

In addition to the professional interpersonal network, which is mainly composed of hierarchical superiors and colleagues, career capital could also be obtained from personal networks beyond the scope of work environments (such as family relations, friends and acquaintances) (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Dickmann & Doherty, 2010; Kanstrén, 2021). Different networks (especially external networks) may provide information about career opportunities outside the organisation where the individual is located. Some studies have shown that social capital can be regarded as the most important key career capital, which is

beneficial to individuals' future career (Kanstrén, 2021; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). Such information and opportunities may function as a basis of future professional aspirations, but could be easily neglected in some circumstances.

### **3.5.3. Research Studies on Career Capital**

With the development of career capital theory, more and more scholars are beginning to pay attention to this concept and the related research has been conducted in the Western academic world for many years (Yan et al., 2016). These research studies mainly focus on the field of enterprise management and human resource management, including the following three themes: the research of career capital in cross-cultural management, the research of three-dimensional importance of career capital, and the research of antecedent variables and outcome variables of career capital. For example, the cross-cultural research has investigated career capital and enterprise expatriates (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Jokinen, 2010; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007; Kanstrén, 2021). The research studies on the influence of career capital have looked at three dimensions on different aspects of career development, including which dimension is the most important to career development and which attracts the attention of individual development (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Harris & Ramos, 2013; Sturges et al., 2003). The research on the influence of career capital has examined how it affects career success, entrepreneurship and career satisfaction (Berkelaar, 2010; Eby et al., 2003; Kong et al., 2012).

In China, the concept of career capital is not widely used in the educational research. There are two different versions of the Chinese translation of this word when searching Chinese documents. One is called 'zhí yè zī běn' (职业资本), and the other is 'zhí yá zī běn' (职涯资本). The disunity of translation leads to some difficulties in searching relevant articles and documents. In the Chinese literature retrieval database, by using these two keywords, the search results are very limited. Only three articles of the results fit the current research

background, but these three articles were written based on human resource theory. For instance, Qing et al. (2015) took 497 middle managers in the financial services industry as the research object, and deeply explored the influence mechanism of career capital on those people's career success. They found that career capital has a significant positive impact on career success. In 2016, Yan, Zou and Qing combined the definition and theoretical model of career capital; they sorted out the related research from the perspectives of cross-cultural management, the three-dimensional importance of career capital, the antecedent variables and outcome variables of career capital. In view of the shortcomings of the current research, they put forward the direction of future research and suggestions in management practice, hoping to provide new ideas for the theoretical research and practice of career management (Yan et al., 2016). In the higher education field, Zhang (2020) investigated the construction of young teachers' professional identity in Higher Vocational Colleges from the perspective of career capital.

The literature mentioned above has highlighted the salient impact of the unique Chinese cultural characteristics on career success, but no research was found that discussed career capital theory in the Chinese higher education context. Hence, research attention should be paid on the academic women's awareness of career capital to identify useful strategies in the Chinese context.

### **3.6. The Barriers of Mid-career Academic Women**

The various studies have revealed the gender inequality of organisational culture and the subtle ways of copying the androcentric values which have been rooted in the society since the 1990s (Tomas et al., 2010). Traditionally, the blindness of organisational theory to gender issues stems from the assumption that organisational culture is neutral to gender. Even in the 1990s, Gherardi (1995) and Maddock (1999) had illustrated this well because they document how organisational culture is reflected in their symbols, metaphors, rituals,

beliefs, and values, while patriarchal hegemony extends throughout society. Despite the lack of available evidence, they also pointed out that university culture implicitly replicated norms and guidelines that impede women's full participation (Tomas et al., 2010). Research related to this area shows that when women are involved in management or leadership responsibilities, their perceptions of their own practices and other aspects of their expectations are largely determined by their gender (Deem, 2003). Similarly, the research studies on higher education and gender also stressed that gender needs to be cross-analysed with other important components such as race, ethnicity, social class or multiple individual and group identity, and gender-related factors (Ropers-Huilman, 2008).

For example, Deem (2003) explored women leaders' careers and organisational experience over a period of years and how they were affected by gender power relations, expectations or discrimination. She also examined whether and how gender relations and cultures related to management, as well as the differences between males and females in teaching, research, and management. Despite men and women sharing equal characteristics, there are differences in management practice. Women tend to emphasise staff development and teaching, while men's greatest interests are in finance and research. Coate et al. (2014) viewed the gender inequality through the lens of the prestige economy, which indicated that prestige, authority or status factors may motivate the academics. They explored how prestige affects gender issues and further discuss this in terms of homosociality, non-transparency of criteria, academic workload balance and self-promotion. The result of this research reflects the lack of transparency of promotion in academic work. Therefore, solely focusing on 'helping' women is far from enough. More importantly, at the same level of academic achievement, female teachers have less confidence than males; they are reluctant to put themselves forward in a match against males to compete for the same position (Coate & Howson, 2014).

There are many ways of categorising the barriers that women are facing in organisations. First appearing in 1986, the ‘glass ceiling’ was used to describe an invisible barrier that prevents women from their progress up the organisational ladder (Powell, 1999). Scholars often use this word to describe the invisible obstacles that many females are facing in their career (Sheng, 2009). The work of exploring the underlying causes of this phenomenon in the context of the university is based on different perspectives and theoretical backgrounds. Northouse (2015) has divided the research results of the woman promotion barriers into three categories: organisational barriers, interpersonal barriers and personal barriers (Jiang, 2011). Tomas et al. (2010) proposed a useful way of analysing the barriers, which is to distinguish difficulties from the external environment and internal characteristics. In their opinion, the barriers encountered by women in their professional development consist in difficulties that derive from the environment and those that originate in the behaviours and attitudes that women tend to exhibit as a social collective.

- *The external barriers*, which include a series of barriers of an external nature that are important in coordinating the women’s occupations and their domestic affairs. Some research study highlights the dilemmas that women stuck in their multiple roles and conflicting responsibilities experience, and how the dilemmas impede expectations of productivity associated with their faculty roles and their feminist affiliation within the academy (Ropers-Huilman, 2008). Many women have experienced tensions between a supposedly egalitarian model and a range of implicit values associated with their inferiority, which are manifested through the promotion criteria, especially gender stereotypes. Identically, some research indicated that by discouraging women in their presence in the position of responsibility, certain beliefs associated with gender were exerted. The stereotypes on women include a lack of ambition in (Hudson & Williamson, 2002) or their lack of leadership capacity (Schein, 2001), which occupied a prime position. Gender-based inequalities also exist in the exercise of administrative functions in the assessment of women and gender stereotyping seems to play a key role

in assessing a woman's competence and performance in her management position (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016).

- *The internal barriers* include: The internalisation of gender-specific behavioural patterns derived from the results of socialisation. As a result, received values often prize service in women over ambition for power, and submission over a capacity for the opposition. This kind of experience that many women experience was called the 'chameleon syndrome', which means a certain denial of one's wishes and opinions, and the person has a tendency to seek the continued approval from others (Magnin et al., 2014). Another intrinsic experience is the 'impostor syndrome' (Fotaki, 2013), which is a psychological pattern that an individual doubts their accomplishments and has a persistent internalised fear of being exposed as a 'fraud'. It is particularly prevalent among women, minorities, and people from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (Roché, 2014).

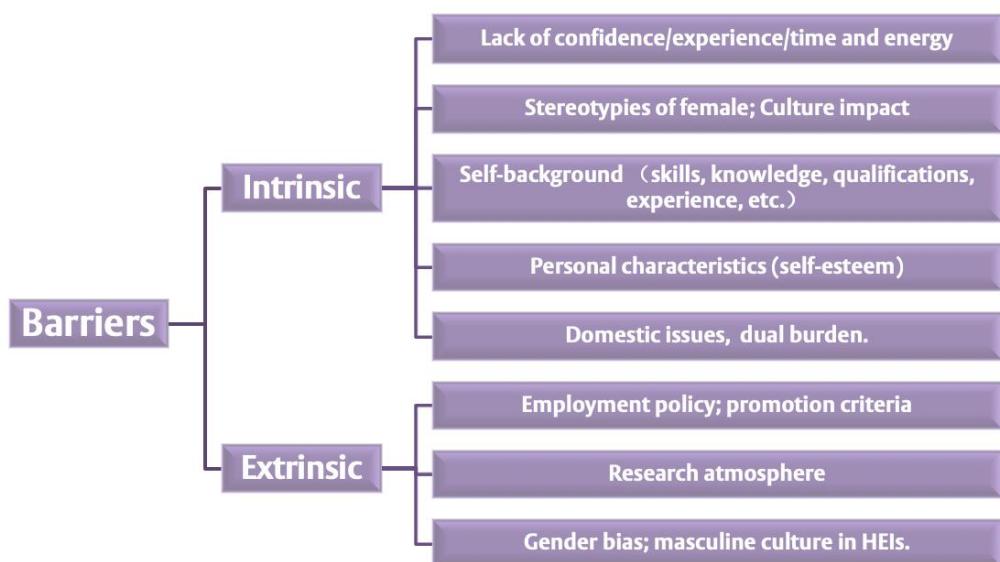
The absence of female role models and mentoring and the scarce interest that many women feel in traditional leadership models may explain women's inactivity to take responsibility in their position (Tomas et al., 2010). Culture and social expectations are also significant. As discussed previously, organisations have been built upon the expectations and aspirations of men historically, so women in senior leadership positions should develop strong social networks within and outside their workplace, as well as prepare for promotion opportunities while men automatically benefit from the 'good old boy networks' (Bronars, 2015; Valk & Jacob, 2008).

Another important barrier is the balance between women's career and domestic affairs, which includes the topic on role overload, multiple roles and conflicting responsibilities (West, 2014). Female leaders often have to make more difficult choices than men, and their conflicting responsibilities can hinder progress towards promotion. In addition, as discussed in section 3.5., higher educational institutions and teachers in China generally pay less attention to planning and designing a career, and the concept of career capital has not been

discussed in the educational field so far. The important knowledge and skills required to develop a career has similarly long been neglected in research. Arguably, limited research and knowledge of women's careers and their career capital in relation to the prestige and research economy in China, could be an important barrier in their career trajectory.

Based on the above discussion of all barriers, the possible barriers that hinder the female scholars' mid-career trajectory in this study are illustrated in the following chart (Figure 3.2). Combined with different views from previous research, the barriers are divided into intrinsic and extrinsic barriers. The internal barriers mainly consist of academic background, personality characteristics, as well as the stereotypes of women that are influenced by the traditional culture and the socially recognised responsibility of women. The external barriers are mainly the academic atmosphere, employment policies, and the prevalent masculine culture in HEIs.

**Figure 3.2. The Barriers of Mid-career Academic Women in HEIs**



What should be paid attention to is that although the barriers that the females encountered in their mid-career trajectory were divided into internal and external causes, there are also mutual influences and interdependence between them. For example, some internal barriers

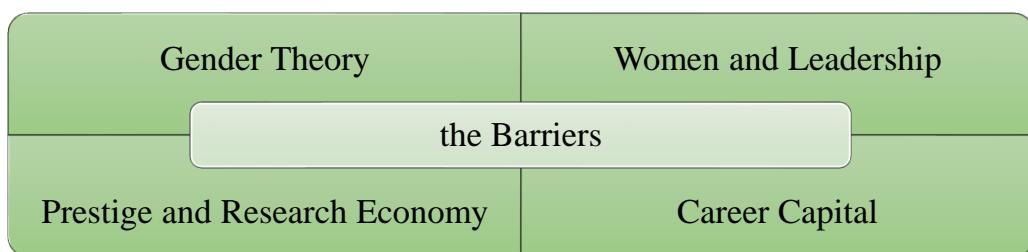
are potentially triggered by external circumstances, such as the ‘chameleon syndrome’ and ‘impostor syndrome’ that have already been mentioned. Moreover, in many circumstances, these internal and external barriers occur simultaneously, or one of them is caused by several other causes working together, or there is one factor that leads to many other causes. They have no strict boundaries or hierarchical subordinate relationships but are independent factors that indicate various situations that women might encounter during their career path.

In conclusion, the two key points needed to be emphasised here are, first, these barriers are independent in that they originate from different aspects of analysis. Second, they are at the same time interacting and interdependent. This thesis will explore the barriers and factors within them that may shape or constrain women’s career progression, focusing on the mid-career stage in higher education in the unique cultural and historical context of China.

### **3.7. Summary**

This literature review has explored the influence of various factors on the promotion of mid-career academic women from the perspectives of gender theory, leadership theory, research economy and career capital. Around these discussions, the researcher has summarised the internal and external factors in the promotion barriers of mid-career academic women in section 3.6. The analytical framework underpinning the research is illustrated in the following figure 3.3.

**Figure 3.3. The Theories Underpinning This Research**



- Gender Theory (Butler, 1986; Lindsey, 2005; Mikkola, 2008; Ortner, 1996; Osborne, 2015; Wei, 2002)
- Women and Leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014; Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Krapfl & Kruja, 2015; Morley, 2013; Northouse, 2013; Tomas et al., 2010; Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016)
- Prestige and Research Economy: (Allen & Parsons, 2006; Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011; Carrier, 2012; English, 2005; Kandiko et al., 2018; Morley, 2018)
- Career Capital: (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Iellatchitch et al., 2003; Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Jokinen, 2010; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007; Zhang, 2020).

As described in this chapter, the research on women's leadership in China is mostly focused on the government and business field, and the research methods adopted are either qualitative study or quantitative study. In addition, it has not been found in the Chinese context that the theory of research economy and career capital is combined with the development of women's leadership, especially in the educational field. This makes this study unique in its method selection, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods and introduces the long-discussed Western concepts into the background of China. As such, the reviews in this chapter will be taken into account when analysing the research results in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter Four. Research Design and Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

Underpinning the theories of gender and culture, women and leadership, research economy and career capital, which were discussed in the previous chapter, this research seeks to examine the career paths, experiences and aspirations of women in mid-career academic roles in Chinese higher education. Since the ‘glass ceiling’ appears to present a barrier to further career progression in these women’s career path, this study aims to analyse the barriers and difficulties, both internal and external, that present obstacles to their progression to senior leadership positions in higher education. As noted in the previous chapter, the promotion of mid-career academic women into leadership in Chinese higher education is rarely mentioned in the literature, especially the promotion of middle-level female leaders to the senior level. This research seeks to contribute to closing the gap in terms of theoretical insight and in practice. Therefore, the overarching focus for this research is the following question:

What strategies do mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to further their career?

This is supported by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How do the mid-career academic women in higher education describe and construct their academic career trajectories?

RQ2. What personal and professional motivators influence the career choices mid-career academic women in higher education make?

RQ3. How do the mid-career academic women in higher education describe their current career aspirations?

RQ4. What are the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership experienced by mid-career academic women?

RQ5. What strategies, if any, do the mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to overcome barriers and pursue career opportunities?

This chapter first explains the rationale of the selected methodology, and discusses the ontological and epistemological aspects, research paradigms and methodological perspectives. Next, this chapter attempts to support the rationality of choosing mixed research methods to solve research problems, and clarify sampling strategies, data collection methods, analytical techniques, validity and reliability and ethical issues.

## **4.2. Underpinning Rationale and Research Paradigm**

In any kind of research in the natural sciences or social sciences, the research philosophy is a vital element. Failing to think on paradigm issues in the research study can seriously affect the quality of research. Kuhn (1962) defines a paradigm as ‘the set of practices that define a scientific discipline at any particular period of time’, and the paradigm embodies the values and beliefs of a group, such that one set of views and beliefs may be incommensurable with another, abiding by different philosophical assumptions, ontologies, and epistemologies. According to Mertens (2012, p.2), the paradigms are ‘philosophical frameworks that delineate assumptions about ethics, reality, knowledge, and systematic inquiry’. Put simply, a paradigm is a worldview or ‘a basic set of beliefs that guide action’ (Guba, 1990, p. 17). Paradigms are shaped by distinct beliefs about epistemology and ontology, and research methodologies (Creswell, 2014). The general philosophical orientation of the researcher underpins the approach adopted to their study and leads them to embrace a qualitative method, a quantitative research method, or mixed methods.

## **4.3. Ontology**

As a part of the major branch of metaphysics traditionally, ontology is about the nature of being, existence, and reality, as well as the basic categories of being and their relations (Guba, 1990). Scholars and researchers have defined the term according to their own perception and

understanding. The researcher may view the social reality as being co-constructed by the people who interact and make meaning of their world in an active way (Bracken, 2010). Moreover, the historical, cultural and philosophical contexts or backgrounds are a critical facet that is needed to be addressed explicitly when adopting those approaches in one's research (Pring, 2002). Thus, from the philosophical perspective, ontology deals with the nature of being or the structure of 'reality', so ontology is a branch of metaphysics (Guarino et al., 2009). Smith (2004) states that 'an ontology defines the most general categories to which we need to refer in constructing a description of reality, and it tells us how these categories are related', and it aims to study the nature of objects and events and their relation to classifying all substances of being (Smith, 2004, p. 86). From the natural science background, some scholars believe ontology is an idea of objective existence and about how people view the social world (Quine, 2013). Although a precise definition of the term is rather difficult, a commonly used definition is 'an ontology was defined to be a specification of a shared conceptualization of a domain' (Flouris et al., 2006, p. 1). Just like any structure storing information, an ontology is constantly changing because the modelled domain is changing as well (Stojanovic et al., 2003).

Therefore, the ontological position adopted in the current research relies on the perceptions and experiences of its participants. In this study, the reality is explored by the experiences of mid-career academic women in Chinese higher education, as well as their perceptions on career promotion. There were two possible paradigms that could be adopted, which were ontological structuralism and ontological constructivism (Bryman, 2016). The difference between them is that structuralism holds the view that human behaviour is the result of individual values and the rules they abide by in their respective society or community, while the constructivism assumes that the interaction between people could explain the social reality. Both of these views provide ontological stands for this research, because the mid-career academic women have deep connections with the campus environment and the academic atmosphere, which also influenced their behaviour. Also, the academic women

interact with each other and share their career experience, which indicates the social reality could be explained by the interaction between people.

#### **4.4. Epistemology**

Epistemology is about how the knowledge is shared, and it is the branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. The epistemological orientation of social science is inherited from the scientific research methods associated with the physical sciences (Bracken, 2010). ‘Scientific methods were believed to provide the factual certainties of the physical sciences and the deductive certainties of logic and pure mathematics’ (Bracken, 2010, p. 3). According to this tradition, the external conditions can be controlled and monitored systematically, so the truth of the nature of human behaviour can also be revealed. Thus, human behaviours are largely determined by an ordered and governed external reality. Besides, logical positivism continues to influence many studies in the field of education and has a major impact on the way educational knowledge is collected and disseminated (Schneider et al., 2007).

In social science, the central issue of epistemology is whether the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles and procedures as the natural sciences (Bahari, 2010). The answer to this question determines how the knowledge developed from the research process is accepted. The social scientists who focus on exploring the historical and cultural context of human interaction believe that focusing on the actors themselves, for instance, those responsible for their actions, should be a critical aspect of the research (Cohen et al., 2000). This discussion helps to identify the different assumptions about social reality and helps to lead to different ways of conducting research. There are two important epistemological assumptions that will be discussed in this section, which are interpretivism and positivism (Bryman, 2016).

Saunders et al. (2009, p. 129) believe that ‘interpretivism is an epistemology that is necessary for the researcher to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors’. As interpretivist researchers play a role as social actors and they can interpret their social roles according to their own set of meanings, interpretivist researchers are often associated as the ‘feeling’ researchers (Saunders et al., 2009). Goldkuhl believes that the main argument is how interpretivism can be understood by people's experience, mind or language, rather than through investigation and observation (Goldkuhl, 2012). Interpretivists think if people want to acquire knowledge of social reality, they should rely on objects and subjective understanding of those who construct their realities through their interactions (Neuman, 2013). In addition, the interpretivists view that findings are often influenced by the researcher's perspectives and values. Some researchers argue that interpretivists' perspectives are highly appropriate in the case of business and management research, especially in marketing and human resource management (Saunders et al., 2007). The real world is not governed by law-like regularities but is mediated through meanings and human agencies (Ritchie et al., 2013). Therefore, qualitative methods such as interviews are often adopted under this paradigm (Basit, 2010). Moreover, the interpretive paradigm gives the participants the opportunity to share their experiences and express their views on research issues.

Positivism does not allow researchers to be subjective, because this approach deals with measurable relationships between verifiable observations, rather than speculation. Thus, the view of positivism is widely accepted and recognised by the empirical sciences. Positivism assumes that besides personal beliefs, there are objective and realistic social facts. Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) state that knowledge is only of significance if it is based on observations of this external reality. The main idea of positivism can be viewed as the social world exists externally, so the researcher should measure it through objective methods independently. Positivist researchers also believe that all authentic knowledge can be verified and observed, and positivist researchers are interested in acquiring knowledge by observing and verifying

a phenomenon (Carlsson, 2018). The positivist researcher believes that ‘there is a clear-cut relationship between things and events in the outside world and people’s knowledge of them’ (Stainton-Rogers, 2006, p. 80). Derived from natural science, research methodologies in positivist views are largely influenced by the logic of experimental designs. Research methods like a large-scale survey of a population or representative sample, formal questionnaires, and standardized interviews are used to investigate a wide range of topics. The use of statistical analysis and the development of measurement models are significant in this approach (Basit, 2010).

Interpretivists believe that the social reality and the individual are unseparated while positivists argue that researchers are separate from social reality (Weber, 2004). Positivists are trying to build knowledge of a reality that exists beyond the human mind while interpretivists recognize that the knowledge they build reflects their particular goals, culture, experience, history, and so on. The positivists believe that independent knowledge provides the foundation for human knowledge. On the other hand, interpretivists recognise their sense-making activities occur within the framework of their life-worlds and the particular goals they have for their work. In this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to balance the outcomes. From the positivists’ view, it is appropriate to use questionnaires to investigate a wider range of mid-career academic women’s working experience in higher education in China. As long as the sample size is moderate, the results could be generalisable. From the interpretivist perspective, this study is exploring the barriers that hinder the promotion to senior leadership from the mid-career academic women’s point of view. Their experiences are based on their knowledge, diverse background, which could increase the depth of this study and lead to a better comprehension on the research question. Therefore, this study adopts mixed methods to avoid the limitations and constraints of a single position.

## **4.5. Research Design: A Mixed Methods Approach**

### **4.5.1. The Foundation of Mixed Methods Research**

There are several foundations for mixed methods research. For quantitative research, it may root in positivism, post-positivism and the scientific paradigm. The qualitative method may root in the interpretive paradigm. The foundations of the mixed methods research have multiple allegiances, and these allegiances determine and embrace the worldviews, ontologies, and epistemologies (Cohen et al., 2018). The mixed methods research concerns not only collecting both qualitative and quantitative data but mixing paradigms to provide a fair explanation of the phenomenon.

There is an ongoing controversy on the paradigms of mixed methods research. Researchers had identified three paradigms in mixed methods, which are dialectical pluralism, pragmatism and the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2012). Morgan (2007) argues against the use of paradigms in mixed methods research and suggests replacing it with ‘approaches’. Much mixed methods research works beyond quantitative and qualitative exclusivity or affiliation, and instead operates in a pragmatist paradigm which draws on, and integrates, both numeric and narrative approaches (Cohen et al., 2018).

Mixed methods research resides in the middle of qualitative and quantitative research methods and incorporates elements from both of them. Often, the distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research is framed in terms of the using of words or numbers (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is a scientific method for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to the social or human problem (Babbie, 2013). The data is typically collected in the participants’ setting and analysed inductively from particulars to general themes, and the researcher should interpret the meaning of the data. By examining the relationship of variables, the quantitative research is for testing objective theories (Given, 2008). The centre of quantitative research is the process

of measurement because it provides the fundamental connection between empirical observation and the mathematical expression of quantitative relationships. Usually, statistical procedures are adopted to analyse the data, which are numbered variables. Researchers who engage in this approach have assumptions about testing the theory deductively and being able to generalise and replicate the findings (Creswell, 2014).

The core of mixed methods research is that the combination of the two approaches could provide a more complete understanding of a research than either approach alone. It integrates the advantages of the two research methods and also overcomes the shortcomings that may be neglected in a single form (Creswell, 2014). For example, a large amount of data collection and the assumptions developed through the quantitative method can help to overcome the limitation of sample size when adopting a qualitative research method. Likewise, qualitative research provides detailed information while the quantitative approach treats some data superficially. In addition, the early ideas about multiple methods also dwelled on the view that all methods have weakness and bias, and the combination of those two methods neutralised the weakness of each form of data. One set of data can help to explain the other database and could explore different types of questions than the other database. It can also lead to better instruments when instruments are not well-suited for the specific sample or population (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In conclusion, the mixed methods approach enables a more comprehensive and complete understanding of phenomena than the single method. It also answers the complex questions more meaningfully and can increase the accuracy of data and reliability (Cohen et al., 2018).

#### **4.5.2. The Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods**

There are many designs in the mixed methods field; the explanatory sequential mixed methods are considered to be the most suitable for this study. Its first advantage is the initial quantitative data results can be explained further with the qualitative data. At the beginning

of the present study, the assumptions and questions were summarised through literature, but the researcher wanted to explore the views and perceptions of academic women in a wider community. Thus, it was necessary to collect general information through questionnaires. The second advantage is that the initial quantitative data collection phase is followed by the qualitative phase, which allows the researcher to have a well-organised time schedule and make adjustments when needed during the data collection process (Creswell, 2014). After analysing the questionnaire data, the researcher could draw conclusions and propose some assumptions and further develop the interview questions based on the quantitative results. Therefore, this study adopts the explanatory sequential mixed methods and the data collection is divided into two phases to interpret the findings and to generalise the findings to the general population (Silverman, 2013).

A qualitative research could reveal the relationships between different variables directly according to the working title and aims, while a quantitative study is rather indirectly by tests the hypotheses (Basit, 2010). The advantages of the interview are not only that it provides detailed information about the research questions, which overcomes the obvious disadvantage (being superficial) of the questionnaire, but also a kind of trust that is built between the interviewer and interviewee. As long as the participants agree to take part in it, the response rate is 100% (Creswell, 2014). Among the different types of interviewing, the face-to-face interview and telephone interview are considered to be the most appropriate approaches, whose advantages and disadvantages will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

The face-to-face interviews are characterised by synchronous communication in time and place. Due to such synchronous communication, unlike other interview methods, face-to-face interviews can take advantage of social cues. Social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language, etc. of the interviewees could provide the interviewer with a lot of extra information that can be added to the verbal answer of the interviewee to a question.

Moreover, there is no significant time delay between question and answer during the face-to-face interview, and the interviewer and interviewee can directly react to what the other says or does. The advantage of this synchronous communication is that the answers of the interviewee are more spontaneous, without an extended reflection. Especially when an unstructured or semi-structured interview list is used, and the interviewer has to formulate questions as a result of the interactive nature of communication. In addition, with the permission of the interviewee, the face-to-face interviews can be recorded, which has the advantage that the interview content is more accurate than writing out notes (Opdenakker, 2006; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

On the other hand, the face-to-face interview has its own disadvantages, such as the cost of the interview is high, as it is difficult to keep costs low when personnel are needed. For example, interviewing an interviewee in a place 200 kilometres away will take a whole day, including travelling and interviewing, and it can take even more days when the interviewee cannot contact the interviewer in time to cancel the interview. Also, the quality of the interview data partly depends on the ability of the interviewer; some may have the natural ability to conduct an interview and gather data well, while others have insufficient skills or biases that could impact the findings. Furthermore, the size of the sample is limited and the number of qualified respondents within that area is limited as well. It may be necessary to conduct several interviews over multiple areas, which again can increase costs (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

This research started with a survey that was disseminated all around China and the interviewees were selected from the survey participants. Thus, the researcher found it was difficult to meet every interviewee in the process of collecting the interviewee's information. Also, some willing participants arranged a very tight schedule for the researcher to conduct the interview, so the interview was changed from a single form (face-to-face interview) to the integration of face-to-face interview and telephone interview. Telephone interviews

could receive a very high response rate and could be completed fairly quickly; more importantly, they helped to reach samples over a wide geographic area in this research. As in face-to-face interviews, synchronous communication implies that the interviewer and interviewee can directly react to what the other says. Also, both the interviewer and interviewee could concentrate much more on the questions that need to be asked and the answers given (Opdenakker, 2006). However, this method may have some disadvantages, such as it loses the social cues and the closeness of interaction between the interviewer and interviewee.

To be more specific, a semi-structured interview is considered to be the most suitable form for this research. It provides flexibility and the schedule of the semi-structured interview allows interviewees to express themselves adequately and sufficiently (Wragg, 2002). In the case of something unexpected, some supplementary questions are required. These questions should link to the participants' responses to previous questions to achieve an in-depth answer. As the literature that has been reviewed in the Chinese higher education context has shown, it may be difficult to elicit insight into women's career aspirations in relation to leadership as they are more likely to ignore such questions due to cultural expectations. Thus, the semi-structured interview format is needed when asking their opinions on the career paths, experiences and aspirations of their academic roles. Besides, there are many research studies that have been undertaken in Western countries which aimed to explore the life of the female leaders; these studies are good examples of using the interview as a suitable method to investigate this topic in depth (Walford, 2001; Wragg, 2002).

#### **4.5.3. Design of Questionnaire and Interview Questions**

The general aim of the present research is to study the career paths, experiences and aspirations of women in the exercise of leadership in university organisations. In order to attain this objective, two different phases were planned in conducting the research: 1) an

online questionnaire, followed by 2) in-depth qualitative interviews (face-to-face interview or telephone interview), each of which had its own specific objectives and different methodological approaches.

#### **4.5.3.1. Design of Questionnaire.**

The design of the questionnaire was influenced by several authoritative research studies. One is the pilot study on gender culture in academia conducted by the EGERA project, and the guidelines emerging from that study for gender equality research (Voorspoels & Meier, 2014). The other guide, from the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), focuses on how researchers can explore the staff and student experience in HEIs to understand essentials and crucial factors evaluating staff wellbeing in an institution (ECU, 2011). Another study which has influenced the design of this study measured the perceptions of the working environment for female faculties in higher education in the United States and Canada. It suggests incorporating three dimensions, namely: 1) the differential treatment of women, 2) balancing work and personal obligations, and 3) sexist attitudes and comments (Sullivan et al., 1997). Although this is over twenty years old, the areas it covers remain topical in the contemporary literature.

Also influencing the design of the questionnaire is research in business management that has focused on the level of participation of women among managerial positions and the opportunities of promoting women into managerial positions (Xie & Zhu, 2016). There are some common issues shared between the management careers of women in the HEIs and business background in China, for instance, the level of participation of women among total managerial positions; the criteria for women to be promoted into senior positions; the satisfaction of women managers towards promotion opportunities and career development; and their views on comparisons with their male colleagues regarding individual effort

leading to promotion opportunities. Therefore, this research provides a comprehensive model of question-designing logic and structure.

The questionnaire developed for this study consists of two parts. The first part contains demographic questions (Question 1 to Question 11, please refer to Appendix 1) seeking information such as age, educational background, the level of managerial position and the duration of work experience. The second part consists of eight questions (Question 12 to Question 19) related to the key topic in the research questions. Question 20 was designed for the participants' intention of further study and the brief list of the questions is in Appendix 1. This following table presents the survey question number and its relation to the corresponding research questions.

**Table 4.1.** *The Questionnaire Question Number and Its Corresponding Research Questions*

Survey question number	Corresponding research questions
Question 12	RQ 3
Question 13	RQ 3, RQ 4
Question 14	RQ 4, RQ 5
Question 15	RQ 4
Question 16	RQ 5
Question 17	RQ 5
Question 18	RQ 4
Question 19	RQ 4

#### **4.5.3.2. Design of Interview Questions.**

The interview questions are divided into two parts as well; the basic questions are related to the participants' educational background and work experience, and the main questions were developed from the five research sub-questions. The basic information is needed when starting a conversation, which includes the interviewees' educational background, their current role and management responsibilities, their own personality traits and hobbies described by themselves, and their marital status. The design of the main interview questions corresponds to the research sub-questions, and has four parts. In order to investigate the personal and professional motivators that influenced the choices they made in their career path, the interviewees need to describe their career trajectory, and explain why and how they started their career in higher education. Some notable or significant experiences or people may be mentioned when they tell the stories and they should evaluate their current income status and aspirations. To investigate the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership in the interviewees' current position, the promotion mechanism of their workplace and how they came to be promoted to their present position, the interviewees were encouraged to describe these in detail. Moreover, the support from both family and workplace should be asked and any opportunities and barriers to their promotion progression within the institution are essential. The last research question is what strategies they adopt in their career to overcome the barriers, so the interview questions were designed to explore these women's experience on handling the difficulties and how they overcome them. In addition, their career prospect planning, suggestions for young girls, and their views on the advantages and disadvantages for men and women competing for the same position were included in the interview questions.

#### **4.6. Sampling**

The questionnaire was designed and distributed to the participants via the WJX website, which provides the function of basic data processing. The participants were mid-career academic women in Chinese higher education. The selection criteria for participants in the study were as follows. For the questionnaire, the participants were women who have worked in higher education for more than three years. To be selected for interview, the participant should (1) be involved in the survey and consent to take part in the interview, and (2) they should be in the middle or senior level of leadership in HEIs in China. The reasons are explained in the following section.

Given the geographically vast and regional disparities in China, it was difficult for the researcher to find the survey targets in a wide range of the locations. The targets are women leaders in higher education institutions from supervisory to senior management levels. Therefore, snowball sampling was the best method to solve this problem (Browne, 2005). At the initial stage, some potential participants were found, and those participants could help to recruit other potential subjects in this research. The steps were repeated until the required sample size was achieved, as the initial estimated number of respondents would be at least 150, which is operative and effective for this research. The researcher found the participants by using connections with the ISLI (International Study and Language Institute) centre at the University of Reading, which has a China Scholarship Council (CSC) course and Chinese University Administrators' Course (CUAC). The participants on these courses are administrative staffs and teachers from different places all around China.

As the mid-career academic woman in Chinese higher education is hard to define, the retirement age and career development theory should be considered here. In 1978, the National People's Congress approved that the statutory retirement age is 60 years old for men and 55 years old for women, which is still valid now (NPC, 2007). For women, the retirement age of 55 is an essential element for them to consider when they plan their career.

Normally, the average age of undergraduate students in China is 22 or 23 years old, but a Bachelor's degree is not competent if they want to find a position in the higher education institutes. So, the average age of the graduates is 25 or 26 years old for Master's and around 30 for PhD graduates. The PhD students' situation is more complex because it normally takes four years for graduation, but the graduation may be delayed for various reasons. Therefore, considering the retirement age is 55 years old, if a woman starts her career immediately after getting her PhD degree, she could work for around 25 years.

According to Super's (1980) classic theory about career development, from 25 to 30 years old, individuals settle down in their chosen profession and they focus on seeking professional and life stability. From 31 to 44 years old, people are committed to achieving career goals, and from 45, they will maintain their achievements and social status, maintain a harmonious relationship between family and work, and find successors. The original theory indicates this maintenance period is from 45 to 64, but for women in China, this phase could be 45 to 55. Due to the discussions above and combined with the current situation in China, women who have worked in higher education for more than five years are suitable to be the participants of the survey. This is because the length of five years is enough for them to understand their career, and they could compare with those with longer working years. The target institutions for the questionnaire are the regular HEIs and the institutions providing postgraduate programmes.

For the interviewees, the participants were those who were willing to continue being interviewed among those who had already participated in the questionnaire survey. The criterion for these participants was that they should be women in middle or senior level of leadership. To be specific, if they were in the administration system (which focuses on the management role which is responsible for the school administrative issues), they should be Section Chief, Division Chief, Director-General, or Minister, etc.; if they are in the teaching system (who major in the academic work and devote most of their energy in teaching and

research), they should be the Dean, Associate Dean, or Department Director, etc., which belongs to Teacher professional titles (for example, Assistant, Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor). Similarly, the interviewees also came from higher education institutions. Generally speaking, as long as a person enters the university to work for a period of time, with promotion, they have some other administrative responsibilities, which may be the leader of teaching or research teams. As discussed in 3.3.1, leadership in the Chinese context means differently from Western, so they generally did not call or regard themselves as leaders. The participants in this research generally did not think they were leaders; only when asked about their specific work content, will they mention that they have some leadership responsibilities.

As mentioned in the introduction chapter (section 1.2.), China's higher education system started relatively late. In learning from the Western higher education system, some teachers who entered the University in early years, or the university teachers in some disadvantaged areas, have only undergraduate degrees. Due to their limited academic skills and qualifications, they could not be promoted to higher leadership roles, so many of them have worked in higher education with only teacher assistant and lecturer titles. Thus, there is a 'Teaching Assistant' option in the Academic titles in the questionnaire.

The position of Counsellor will be frequently mentioned in this research and it was not familiar in the Western higher education context. Counsellors refer to the school public servants who are engaged in the ideological and political education of students, students' daily management, employment guidance, mental health and the construction of students' Party and League (Zhao, 2017). Each Counsellor generally manages one or more classes. Their main responsibilities are ideological and theoretical education and value guidance as well as the construction of study style, which involves guiding students to carry out extracurricular academic practice activities and creating a strong learning atmosphere. Also, they are responsible for student daily affairs management, mental health education and

consultation. They shouldered a lot of tasks, but they are at the most basic position of the management staff (Luo, 2016; Geng, 2020). Counsellors needed to provide students with scientific career planning and employment guidance and related services to help students establish a correct concept of employment. Counsellors' research activities mainly focused on learning the basic theory of ideological and political education, as well as related discipline knowledge, participating in academic exchange activities, and participating in the research of ideological and political education topics or projects inside and outside the school (Geng, 2020).

It is worth noting that in China's higher education system, a college degree is different from Bachelor's degree. Firstly, in terms of admission requirements, the admission scores of college students are generally lower than those of undergraduate students. Generally speaking, students who fail to meet the undergraduate admission line in the college entrance examination (Gaokao) will choose to study in colleges. Secondly, the teaching purpose of college is different from that of universities. It takes three years for college students to complete their degree in China's higher education, while undergraduates should study for four years (Yan, 2017; Li, 2021). University education focuses on understanding theoretical knowledge and cultivating research talents, whereas college mainly focuses on practical skills. In terms of employment competitiveness, college students are generally weaker than students who graduated from universities. There are some job recruitment standards that point out the candidates should have a Bachelor's degree or above degrees (Wu, 2021). Also, there is an examination for college graduates who want to change from college degree holders to Bachelor's degree holders. Thus, in this research, the College degree and Bachelor's degree were set as different options in the educational background.

## **4.7. Data Collection**

### **4.7.1 Pilot Online Questionnaire**

In order to evaluate the feasibility, time, adverse events, and improve upon the study design prior to the performance of a full-scale research project, a small-scale preliminary pilot study was needed in this research. The whole research was conducted in the Chinese language; to overcome the language barriers, the questionnaire and interview questions were initially designed in English on the WJX website and were then translated into Chinese. In early April 2019, the link of the questionnaire was sent to ten female teachers in different higher education institutes in China to test how long it took to complete the survey and to check the logic of the questionnaire. The pilot study helped to test the design of the full-scale research, and it is a potentially valuable insight to improve the chances of a clear outcome (Gastel & Day, 2016; Meriwether, 2001). The whole questionnaire pilot study lasted around two weeks.

### **4.7.2. Preparing the Online Questionnaire**

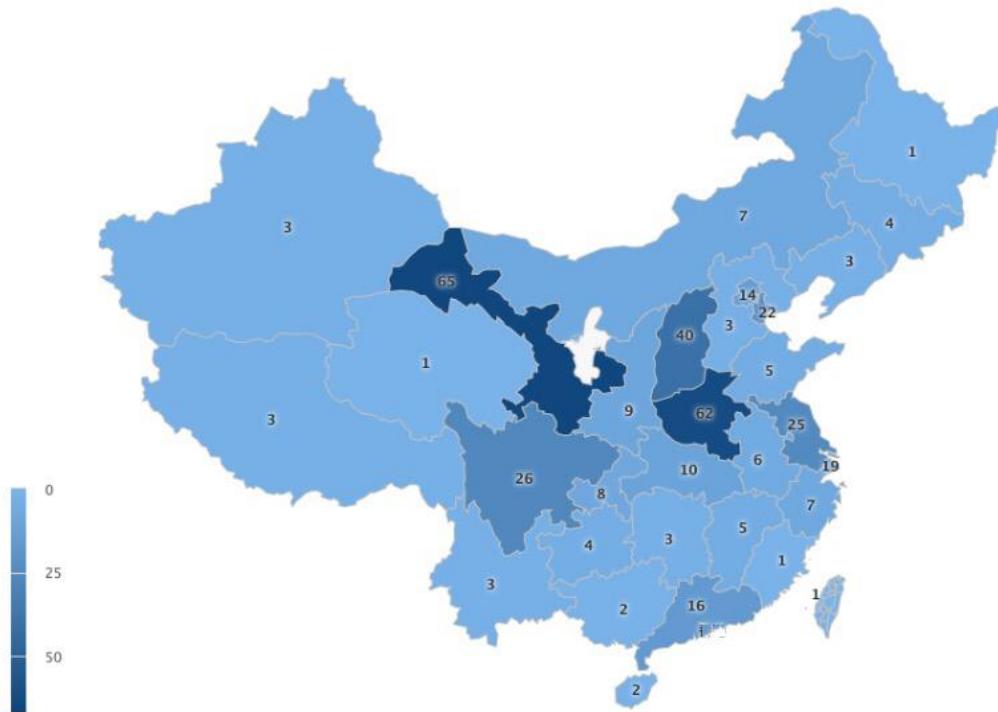
As planned at the beginning, the SurveyMonkey questionnaire website was suggested to be the applicable website, but once starting using it, fees are required. Moreover, this website used traditional Chinese language, not simplified Chinese language which is widely used in mainland China. This is not very beneficial for disseminating and reading the questionnaire, so the WJX website was chosen. After several rounds of testing and trying out the functions, the services of WJX were found to be professional and reliable. From 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019, the questionnaire was available online. It was bilingual for those who are capable of both languages. Based on the function provided by WJX, some adjustments were made so that more details were collected, like the region that the participants were from, and comments or suggestions were welcomed at the end of the questionnaire. Specifically, the question about whether they would like to participate in the next phase of the interview was asked and they could leave their contact information if they liked.

#### **4.7.3. Questionnaire Distribution and Sample**

The questionnaire link was sent to all the researcher's acquaintances, who were university teachers and Chinese PhD students and families. The professional acquaintances from IoE have helped and forwarded the link through email and social media. As planned early, a teacher from the ISLI centre in the University of Reading helped to send the link to the Chinese teachers who participated in the Chinese University Administrators' Course (CUAC) course. Nearly 300 responses were received after four weeks of disseminating, which exceeded the expectation by a large margin. The questionnaire was officially closed online on 31<sup>st</sup> July with 395 responses. The target number was around 200 responses, so the figure was far beyond the expectation.

The questionnaire was published online from April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 to July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019; the total number of people who filled in the questionnaire was 395. According to the IP address, the questionnaire received replies from 32 provinces, autonomous regions or municipalities (provinces refer to the administrative planning of the People's Republic of China, which currently has 34 provincial administrative regions, including 23 provinces, five autonomous regions, four municipalities directly under the central government, and two special administrative regions).

**Figure 4.1. The Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents' Regions**



In terms of the locations of these women academics, the map above (Figure 4.1.) reflects the distribution of the number of people participating in the questionnaire survey in different provinces; the darker the blue colour, the more the responses from that place. Among them, the response from Gansu Province, Henan Province and Shanxi Province ranked top three, which accounted for 16.62%, 15.86% and 10.23% of the responses, respectively. This was mostly due to the snowball sampling technique, which started first with the researcher's personal contacts at the University of Reading.

As for the working years of the respondents in the questionnaire, although it was indicated at the beginning of the questionnaire disseminating stage that only those who have worked for more than five years can participate, but some respondents who have worked for less than five years also participated in the survey. After sorting out the data, it was found that only 14 participants with less than three years of work experience and 44 participants with less than five years of work experience in the educational field. Except for those obviously illogical responses that were excluded from the data, the remaining 391 questionnaires were retained. The reason is that when examining the data of these participants, it is found that

among the 26 people who have worked for one to three years, 8 hold Doctoral degrees, and 14 had Master's degrees. Among these 26 participants, 8 were Lecturers, and one was an Associate Professor. Moreover, in the interview with *Feng*, she said that she filled in 'one year' in the column of working years because her previous work field was not education. Considering that some of these participants have relatively strong educational backgrounds and academic titles in universities, their responses could compare with those with longer working years, so all the data from 391 participants were kept for further analysis.

**Table 4.2. The Demographic Profile of the Questionnaire Participants**

Item	Classification	N	(%)
Age groups	1950s (60-69 years old)	1	0.26
	1960s (50-59 years old)	37	9.46
	1970s (40-49 years old)	127	32.48
	1980s (30-39 years old)	200	51.15
	1990s (20-29 years old)	26	6.64
Education	College degree	2	0.51
	Bachelor's degree	43	11.00
	Master's degree	241	61.64
	Doctorate degree	102	26.09
	Other	3	0.77
Academic titles	Teaching Assistant	30	7.67
	Lecturer	167	42.71
	Associate Professor	101	25.83
	Professor	21	5.37
	Administrative position	60	15.35
	Other	12	3.07
Years of working in the higher education	1 - 5	69	17.65
	6 - 10	97	24.81

11 - 15	94	24.04
16 - 20	67	17.14
21 - 30	53	13.55
more than 30	11	2.81
Faculty or department		
Arts & humanities	216	55.24
Information services	6	1.53
Science & technology	38	9.72
International unit	2	0.51
Business school	10	2.56
Marketing & development	4	1.02
Other	115	29.41

Question 1 (Q1) to question 12 (Q12) required respondents to give demographic and general personal information. As shown in Table 4.2., their age ranged from 24 to 60 years old; only one participant was born in the 1950s (in 1959). Over half came from the 1980s group (30-39 years old), followed by the age group of the 1970s (40-49 years old) with 32.48%. In terms of educational background, 61.64% held Master's degrees and 26.09% Doctorate degrees. Two held College degrees and 43 held Bachelor's degrees. As for the academic titles of the respondents, 42.71% were Lecturers. The Associate Professor ranked second (25.83%), followed by those in an Administrative position (15.35%). The average working time in the current higher education institution was 12.71 years. The average length of working in the higher education system was 18.04 years, with a minimum of more than one year and a maximum of 36 years. Most participants were in the Arts and Humanities faculty or department; those who chose 'Other' were mainly from social science, e.g. the foreign language school, Tourism and Service Management, etc. These participants may not have been familiar with the categories of the departments.

**Table 4.3. The Relationship Status and Child(ren) Condition of the Questionnaire***Participants*

Item	Classification	N	(%)
<b>Current relationship status</b>	Married	332	84.91
	Widowed	4	1.02
	Divorced or Separated	14	3.5
	In a domestic partnership or civil union	3	0.77
	Single, but cohabiting with a significant other	10	2.56
	Single, never married	28	7.16
<b>Spouse's or partner's employment status</b>	Employed, working full-time	335	85.68
	Employed, working part-time	7	1.79
	Not employed, looking for work	3	0.77
	Not employed	1	0.26
	Not looking for work	1	0.26
	Retired	1	0.26
	Disabled, not able to work	0	0
	N/A	36	9.21
	Other	7	1.79
<b>Child(ren)</b>	Yes, all 18 or over	56	14.32
	Yes, one or more under 18	256	65.47
	No	79	20.20

(Note: 'a significant other' indicated that they have a steady connection but are not married. In daily language, it refers to an intimate relationship, which is applicable to both men and women. It does not represent a politically correct position but does not disclose or present a person's marital status or sexual orientation.)

A total of 123 survey participants (31.46%) indicated they would be prepared to take part in a follow-up research interview, but only 60 participants provided their contact information. Thus, the interviewees in the second research stage were found from those 60 people. After contact with those who consented to be interviewed, 17 interviews were arranged. However, due to one of the interviewees not being qualified, who had just started her career in higher education as a counsellor for only one month, a final total of 16 interviews were conducted.

#### **4.7.4. Pilot Interviews**

There were four pilot semi-structured face-to-face interviews that were conducted before the official start of the research. The ideas and clues that may not have foreseen before conducting the pilot study could increase the chances of getting clearer findings in the main study. For every single interview question, it permits a thorough check of the planned questions and procedure to make the implementation of the main study more efficient (Gastel & Day, 2016; Meriwether, 2001). Thus, four academic women who were in middle level leadership positions were invited to participate in the pilot interviews. The first pilot interview was conducted in February 2019 and the following three in May and June 2019; this was due to the different purposes of these four pilot interviews. The first one was at the beginning stage of the research, which aimed to collect more information on the responses of interviewees. After one month of questionnaire disseminating, some survey participants responded to the call of the participation. Therefore, the following three were conducted to test the feasibility of the interview questions. All these four pilot interviews were included in the analysis afterwards and adjustments in interview questions were made through the interaction with the interviewee. For example, repetitive questions that covered the same topic were merged; and some topics frequently mentioned by respondents but not prepared before were added.

The initial interview questions were based on separate narratives of each research sub-question. In other words, four themes of the research sub-questions were subdivided. For each of these four sub-questions, they were decomposed in the form of questions that can be more integrated into daily conversation. Thus, the initial interview questions were relatively original. In the first pilot face-to-face interview which was conducted on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2019, there were some problems, such as the translation of English into Chinese was not very precise or straightforward. The translation of the terms needed to be reconsidered due to the cultural difference; for example, the translation of administrative level and different expressions for the workplace. In addition, if the scope of a single question is too broad, the interviewee may give much information that even includes the following questions. This pilot interview took around 40 minutes, and the researcher made many reflections on question design and translation, which helped her to make adjustments to the order and translation of the interview questions.

The second pilot interview began a month after the questionnaire was sent out. After the questionnaire was launched on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019, more than 390 responses were received. The data of the questionnaire revealed some more curious problems which needed to be solved. This time, a female teacher who had worked in a university for five years and was doing her PhD at that time gave some new ideas on the interview questions. Some new questions were included in the interview based on the questionnaire data, and the language used in the interview questions was evaluated to see whether it is in line with the general background of China and the educational environment. After summarising the feedbacks, the original interview questions were revised accordingly, which included adjusting the order of some questions and some hints were added to the semi-open questions.

Later, in May 2019, two Chinese female teachers who were academic visitors to the University of Reading were invited to this research. Their career stages were also very suitable for the research. The second modified version of the interview questions was used

to interview them. These two interviews took a little more than an hour, respectively, and were transcribed shortly after that. Some adjustments were also made for future interviews accordingly to these interviews and their feedbacks. After reporting all the pilot interviews to the researcher's supervisor on 12<sup>nd</sup> June 2019, she advised many practical interview techniques, for example, making some forms for the teachers to fill in the background information, which could reduce the interview time. She also suggested that the career path of the mid-career academic women should be regarded as a time axis, so it was clear for the researcher and interviewees to visualise the career trajectory. The interviewees could draw the timeline by themselves if they wanted to, but this behaviour was more practical in the face-to-face interviews. Because of the geographical limitations, if individual interviews are conducted by telephone, it is hard to achieve this.

#### **4.7.5. Interview Phase of the Study**

On 13<sup>th</sup> June 2019, the annual IoE postgraduate conference was held, and the researcher made a poster presentation on the conference, which attracted several other Chinese female scholars. They showed their interest in this research and were willing to participate in the interview (after finishing the online questionnaire). Then, the appointments were made after the conference, and three more face-to-face interviews were done in the following weeks. This was also the start of the official interview after the four pilot interviews. On 14<sup>th</sup> June 2019, the first official interview was done. Then the researcher went to China to continue the data collection. In the following June and July 2019, 13 female teachers in higher education in China were interviewed. Together with the pilot interviews, there were seven face-to-face interviews and ten telephone interviews. One telephone interview was discarded because the interviewee did not meet the requirements of working years (she had only started working for three months), and she was not in the mid-career stage. Therefore, there were 16 interviews in the end. Originally, 15 interviews were planned and finally 17 teachers were interviewed (one was abandoned).

The whole interview stage was completed in July 2019, and then according to the plan, the 16 interviews were transcribed by the researcher, which took nearly a month, from August to the beginning of September 2019. Then they were translated from Chinese to English from September to October 2019. The translations were reviewed by a doctoral student who studied English for undergraduates to ensure their accuracy. On 18<sup>th</sup> October, the researcher returned to the UK according to the original plan and discussed with her supervisor about the next stage.

#### **4.7.6. Profile of the Interviewees**

This section presents the profile of the 16 interviewees, who came from different areas of mainland China, including North China, East China, South China, Northwest and Southwest China (there was a lack of interviewees from Central and Northeast China). There were one Professor, five Associate Professors, three Associate Researcher Fellows and seven Lecturers. There were eight MA holders and seven PhD holders. One was only an undergraduate because the requirements for academic qualifications in the early years were not as strict as they are now. Their working time in higher education ranged from three months to 25 years (*Feng* had only three months' work experience in the current university, but she had worked five years before. She went to work as a journalist for one year after she got master's degree, then she had a part-time job in a Geography Research Institute, and she was also studying for a doctorate degree at the same time). Each of the interviewees was given a pseudonym according to the order of the Book of Family Names in China, which was written in the early Northern Song Dynasty, and it is an enlightenment book for children in ancient China. The profile of each interviewee included her demographic information, educational background and work experiences, and they are presented in Table 4.4, which are the regions that they were living, their current professional title, their educational

background and the year of they started work. Table 4.5 presents their marital status and their child(ren)'s age group.

**Table 4.4. Profile of the Interviewees I**

Information of the interviewees					
No.	Name	Location	Title	Educational background	Year of start working
1	Zhao	North China	Professor	Bachelor's degree	1994
2	Qian	Northwest China	Associate Professor	Doctor's degree	2002
3	Sun	North China	Lecturer	Master's degree	2010
4	Li	South China	Associate Professor	Doctor's degree	1997
5	Zhou	East China	Professor	Master's degree	1999
6	Wu	Southwest China	Associate Professor	Master's degree	1999
7	Zheng	Southwest China	Lecturer	Master's degree	2012
8	Wang	East China	Associate Professor	Doctor's degree	2009
9	Feng	Northwest China	Lecturer	Doctor's degree	2019
10	Chen	Northwest China	Lecturer	Doctor's degree	2011
11	Chu	Northwest China	Lecturer	Master's degree	2013
12	Wei	East China	Associate Researcher fellow	Master's degree	1998
13	Jiang	East China	Associate Researcher fellow	Doctor's degree	2003
14	Shen	East China	Associate Researcher fellow	Doctor's degree	1999
15	Han	East China	Lecturer	Master's degree	2012
16	Yang	North China	Lecturer	Master's degree	2009

**Table 4.5. Profile of the Interviewees II**

Information of the interviewees (continue)			
No.	Name	Marital status	Child (Children)
1	Zhao	Married	Over 18 years old.
2	Qian	Married	Over 18 years old.
3	Sun	Divorced	Primary school age
4	Li	Married	Senior high school age
5	Zhou	Married	Over 18 years old.
6	Wu	Married	Primary school age
7	Zheng	Married	Preschool age
8	Wang	Married	Primary school age
9	Feng	Married	Kindergarten age
10	Chen	Married	Kindergarten age
11	Chu	Single	None
12	Wei	Married	Senior high school age
13	Jiang	Married	Junior high school age
14	Shen	Married	Primary school age
15	Han	Married	Kindergarten age
16	Yang	Married	Preschool age

As is shown in the tables above, the age group of the interviewees ranged from early 30s to 50s; the eldest was close to retirement. All of them were married except for one who was single (*Chu*) and one who was divorced (*Sun*). Except for the single one, twelve of them had one child, and three of them had two children. *Sun* was divorced with a primary school age

child. Although their husband's detailed information was not asked during the interviews, the married respondents expressed that they all had dual work families, and their husbands were mostly teachers or engaged in education industry.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the staff in the administration system and the teaching system are completely different in their work priorities. The administration system focuses on job management, which is responsible for the daily administrative issues (but there were still a few teaching tasks), while the teachers majoring in academic devoted most of their energy in teaching. Among the 16 interviewees, four were in the administration system and 12 in the academic system; some of their job responsibilities may have overlapping parts of administration and teaching. The levels of administrative posts are Section Chief, Division Chief, Director-General, and Minister. And the levels of academic posts are: Teaching Assistant, Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor. Moreover, people in these two systems can flow to each other. In the following examples, some people in administrative posts could transfer or had transferred successfully to the teaching posts. Some did this through application and assessment, and others through the enhancement of their academic background to achieve the standard of being lecturers.

The common characteristic shared among them was that they were all mid-career academic women, although some of them did not realise this. In interviews, the word 'teacher' often appeared in the conversations, and they were more willing to be called 'teachers'. This was because the Chinese people think that 'teacher' is an honorific title, and it is used to refer to academic or administrative staff who work in universities, to show respect. As for the experience of overseas learning, nine of them had had the experience of studying abroad, whether they had obtained degrees, advanced training or as visiting scholars. This meant that they had all had the experience in cross-cultural learning from an international perspective. In addition to the administrative teachers, most of the respondents came from social science departments in HEIs.

## 4.8. Data Analysis

### 4.8.1. Analysing the Questionnaire Data

Once the quantitative database was created, explorations of the data were carried out in SPSS (version 23). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilised, and the tables and graphs helped intuitively illustrate the data. Descriptive statistics describe and present data and do not make any inferences or predictions but simply present what was found. The mean, median, mode, minimum and maximum scores, and standard deviation are all descriptive statistics. On the other hand, inferential statistics aim to make inferences and predictions based on the data, for example, hypothesis testing, difference testing using *t*-tests and correlation analysis, etc. (Field, 2013). The mean, median, mode and standard deviation (SD) were employed at first to describe the dataset, and then the correlation analysis was carried out to find out if there was any relationship between different groups. The groups were categorised in different ways according to the questions, such as their age, marital status, relationship status, etc.

After data collection, the quantitative data were downloaded from the WJX website in order to merge and clear the data to prepare for SPSS analysis. The general description of the questionnaire and the analysis of results is reported in the following chapter (Chapter 5). Here, the tests that were undertaken and the rationale are explained.

As mentioned in section 4.7.2., 395 responses were received, but four respondents have been deleted as they did not qualify for this research. Two (respondents 127 and 130) had the occupation of student. Respondent 206 gave confusing answers. For example, this person was born in 1986, but her children had reached adulthood, and she used ‘widowed’ to describe her current relationship status, but the description of her partner was ‘disabled’. She chose ‘5’ for all the scale questions. There were other obviously illogical responses. Finally,

respondent 105 was not in the higher education system. Therefore, these four respondents were omitted, leaving 391 respondents for analysis.

In total, there are 20 questions in this questionnaire; the brief question list is attached in Appendix 1. Q1 to Q11 are general questions on the participants' background. Q12 is a single choice question on the participants' view on their career planning, Q13 and Q14 are matrix scale questions, and Q15 to Q19 are single choice questions on their attitudes towards some aspects of their career. Q20 is concerned with their intention of further study. Due to the different types of questions, different tests were run for their type, respectively.

A descriptive analysis is an essential first step for conducting statistical analyses. It gives an idea of the distribution of the data and enables the identification of the associations among variables, preparing for further statistical analyses (Field, 2013). Thus, the descriptive analysis of every individual question was carried out, and the findings are reported in the next chapter (Chapter 5). The following are some tests that were used in this research.

### **(1). One-sample *t*-test**

The one-sample *t*-test compares the mean of a single sample to a predetermined value to determine if the sample mean is significantly greater or less than that value. Therefore, one-sample *t*-test analysis was run on Q2, from Q6 to Q12, and from Q16 to Q19.

### **(2). Paired-samples *t*-tests**

Several paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the participants' attitudes towards Q12, Q16, Q17, Q18 and Q19 according to different groups, which were divided according to Q2, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10 and Q11. It aimed to test whether different people have the same or different answers to the same question, according to different ways of group division, for example, in different working years, in different academic title groups, or in different educational backgrounds, etc.

### **(3). Matrix scale question**

Q13 and Q14 are matrix scale questions, and they are different types from other questions, so the validity and reliability should be tested separately, as discussed in the following three parts. The validity and reliability of Q13 and Q14 were tested and assured according to the following method:

#### **(3-1). Validity Analysis**

Validity analysis is used to study the rationality of the design of quantitative data (especially attitude scales) and used to analyse whether the research items are reasonable and meaningful. The validity analysis uses the data analysis method of factor analysis to carry on the research, respectively, through the KMO value, commonality, and variance interpretation rate value, factor loading and other indicators to carry out the comprehensive analysis, in order to verify the validity level of the data (Field, 2013). The KMO value is used to judge the validity, the commonality value is used to exclude unreasonable research items, the variance interpretation rate value is used to explain the level of information extraction, and the factor loading coefficient is used to measure the corresponding relationship between factors (dimensions) and items. The outcome of this test assured the validity of these matrix scale questions.

#### **(3-2). Reliability Statistics (Split-half)**

In order to test the reliability of this research, the split-half reliability was used. The whole questionnaire responses were split into two parts; the Cronbach  $\alpha$  coefficient and correlation coefficient of the two half scores were calculated to estimate the reliability of the whole scale. A reliable test has a high correlation, indicating that each respondent would perform equally well (or as poorly) on both halves of the test. The outcome of this test assured the reliability of the matrix scale questions.

#### **(3-3). Reliability Statistics (Cronbach Alpha)**

One problem with the split-half reliability coefficient is that it is based on alternate forms that have only one-half the number of items that the full test has. Reducing the number of items on a test generally reduces its reliability coefficient. To get a better estimate of the reliability of the full test, the Cronbach Alpha reliability test was also applied. Another problem with the split-half method is that the reliability estimate obtained using one pair of random halves of the items is likely to differ from that obtained using another pair of random halves of the items. Therefore, the use of both reliability tests reinforced the reliability of the matrix scale questions.

#### **(4). One-way ANOVA Analysis**

One-way ANOVA analysis was used to study the differences between Q2, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10 and Q12, and from Q16 to Q19 in order to test if two or more groups differ from each other significantly in one or more characteristics. In this research, it means whether the groups differ from each other significantly in certain circumstances or statements in their responses to a particular question. For example, to test whether different educational backgrounds have different attitudes towards career planning, Q2 (educational background) and Q12 (career planning) were tested through one-way ANOVA analysis. The one-way ANOVA test results are presented in Appendix 8.

##### **4.8.2. Analysing the Interview Data**

The second phase of the study, as an interpretative study, was specifically oriented towards exploring the experiences of mid-career academic women at the universities. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted among those who consented to be interviewed. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Using the transcription, a narrative synthesis was created for each of them highlighting the subjects touched upon, identifying salient issues and noting response patterns for each of the questions. To overcome the

language barriers, all the transcripts were translated from Chinese to English, and all the analyses were conducted in English.

#### **4.8.2.1. Data Transcribing and Translating**

The whole interview stage was completed in July 2019, and then according to the plan, the 16 interview recordings were transcribed from 1<sup>st</sup> August to the beginning of September 2019. After the transcribing, all the interviews were translated to English by the researcher, who is a native speaker of Chinese and competent in both languages. Next, the researcher invited a Chinese doctoral student who studied English to the level of teaching undergraduates to examine the translation and he confirmed its accuracy. Please refer to Appendix 3 for an example of an interview transcription.

#### **4.8.2.2. Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is adopted to analyse the qualitative data in this research. It is an important method of analysing qualitative data, which was originally developed for psychology research by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It is usually applied to transcripts of interview data, to enable the researcher to scrutinise the data to identify common themes and patterns that emerge from the data. Various approaches can be applied using thematic analysis techniques; but the six-step approach developed by Clarke & Braun (2017) was adopted to analyse qualitative data. This has been used in studies around the world so offered a reliable method (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013), that was logical from the perspective of the researcher.

##### **Step 1: Familiarisation**

Familiarisation is the first step, which aims to give the researcher a thorough overview of the interview data. This stage involved data transcribing, translating, reading through the

text and taking initial notes, and generally looking through the data to get familiar with the qualitative data in this research.

### **Step 2: Coding**

Coding is the first and most important procedure of interpreting the interviewees' words. The aim of coding is to carefully review the records of each interview and highlight all relevant or potentially interesting content. Accordingly, 'when a researcher finds a meaningful segment of text, he or she assigns a code or category name to signify or identify that particular segment' (Johnson & Chistensen, 2008, p. 535).

Different types of software are designed to help researchers analyse qualitative data; among them, NVivo 12 was used in the data analysis in this research. It has been designed with very rich text-based and multimedia information, and different sizes of data can be processed. It is widely used in a diverse range of fields, including social science, and is predominantly used by academic researchers (Robson, 2016). All the coded elements can be analysed by the software regarding the relationships among them. However, if there is any defect in analysing the process by the software, the problem can be dealt with manually.

In this research, after importing all the interview transcripts into NVivo 12, the first round of basic coding started, which was mapping the questions and answers to the corresponding categories, such as personal background information, academic career trajectories and career planning, and so on. For instance, Table 4.6 that follows presents a brief version of the preliminary coding list; the complete coding list is presented in Appendix 4.

**Table 4.6. A Brief Version of the Preliminary Coding List**

Node Name	Files	References
Background information	0	0

Node Name	Files	References
Children	15	16
Education experience	16	21
Hobbies	14	15
Weekends	1	1
Main responsibility	12	15
Marriage	15	15
Personality	15	16
Professional title	16	17
Academic career trajectories	1	1
Academic trajectories	13	15
Better platform provided	8	9
Current role details	16	29
Important people or experiences	16	16
Career planning	16	46
Career stages	14	16

In this table above, node name means every individual topic that related to the research sub-questions. Files refer to how many interviews of the 16 imported transcripts mentioned the node (related topics). The term references in this table indicates that in the 16 transcripts, how many times this node had been marked.

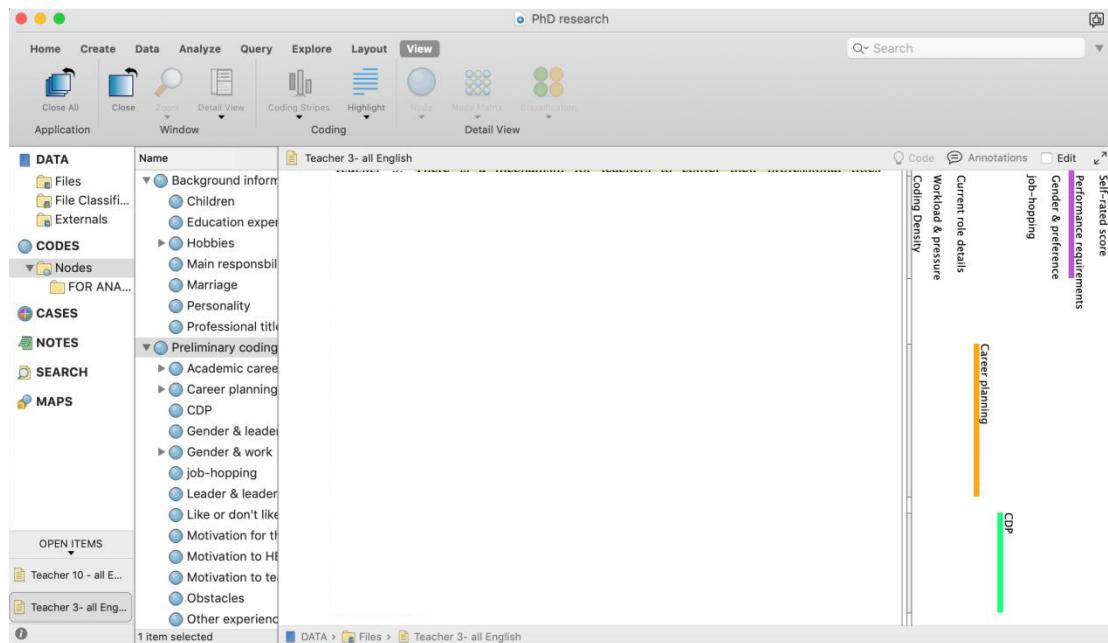
### Step 3: Generating themes

After the first round of coding, all the codes that had been created were reviewed and patterns were identified among them. Generally, themes are broader than codes and several codes could be combined into a single theme. Some codes from the previous step may be too vague or not relevant enough (for example, those codes that did not appear frequently in the data)

were discarded, while other codes might become themes in this step. In this study, the associated research sub-questions with these nodes were used to divide each node into corresponding categories.

For example, RSQ4 in this research is concerned with the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership in participant's current position. The nodes associated with this question were: workload & pressure, work & family, support from family/uni/colleagues/leaders, promotion requirements, publishing, performance requirements, a better promotion platform/process, etc. After this division, the researcher reviewed the coding list again and merged some similar nodes, and then sorted out all the nodes according to the order and classification of the five research sub-questions. Figure 4.2. is an example of coding in NVivo 12.

**Figure 4.2. An Example of Coding in NVivo 12**



After finishing the above steps, combined with the results of the questionnaire, the five research sub-questions were answered, respectively. Figure 4.3. shows an example of classifying each node according to the research problem.

**Figure 4.3. An Example of Classifying Each Node According to the Research Problem**

Name	answer which RQ	Description	Files	References
Preliminary coding			0	0
Academic career trajectories	RQ1.		1	1
Academic trajectories	RQ1.		13	15
Better platform provided	RQ3.	Does the university provide a better platform for you? about current role, to what extent are you responsible for managing resources/ people/ budgets/ strategic decision making	8	9
Current role details	RQ1.		16	29
Important people or experiences	RQ2.	Important people or experiences that have affected their career	16	16
Career planning	RQ3.	Career planning from now on	16	46
Career stages	RQ3.		14	16
CDP	RQ3.	Develop skills and training provided.	10	15
Gender & leadership	RQ3.		12	18
Gender & work	RQ3.	Do you think your gender has affected your career?	15	21
Gender & preference	RQ3.		13	21
job-hopping	RQ3.		1	1
Leader & leadership	RQ3.		11	11
Like or don't like in work	RQ3.		16	19
Motivation for the job	RQ2.		1	2
Motivation to HE	RQ2.	Why they choose the higher education	1	1
Motivation to teach	RQ2.	why they chose to be teachers	2	2
Obstacles	RQ4.		12	13
Other experiences			1	1
Other jobs	RQ3.	Have you ever thought about engaging in other industries? Why do you still want to stay in higher education?	11	11
Performance requirements	RQ4.	the performance requirements of your position every year,	12	19
Pregnancy and marriage & career	RQ4.	pregnancy and marriage could affect a woman's career?	13	13
Pressure	RQ4.	Did you feel some pressure when you were promoted	1	1
Promoting intention	RQ3.		14	14
Promotion ambitious	RQ3.		8	10
Publishing	RQ4.		11	19

#### **Step 4: Reviewing themes**

The purpose of this step is to ensure that all the selected themes were valuable and accurate data representations. It involves returning to check the data set and comparing the themes with the data to check whether there is any omission. Do these themes really exist in the data? Have you made any changes to make your theme work better? Is there anything to do to make the themes work better? The themes may be split, merged, or discarded or new themes may be created. This process was followed with all themes to ensure they were accurate and suitable for this research.

#### **Step 5: Defining and naming themes**

The final list of themes was determined in this step. The naming of each theme was decided according to the research sub-questions and research keywords of this study. These named themes required the researcher revisit the meaning of each theme to ensure it accurately represented the data could be easily understood. Consequently, concise and precise language was needed in naming the themes.

The complete coding list can be found in Appendix 4 and another example of coding in NVivo 12 can be found in Appendix 7. The findings of the qualitative analysis are presented in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

### **Step 6: Writing up**

The last step was writing up the analysis of the qualitative data to accurately reflect the results of data analysis. These findings are presented in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

#### **4.8.2.3. Reflexivity in research**

Reflexivity involves stepping back and reflecting on oneself as a researcher to understand how personal beliefs, values, experiences and judgements might have shaped the research, as well as the way it is written, and the conclusions being reached (Henwood, 2008). It involves awareness that the researcher and the object of study affect each other mutually and continually in the research process (Haynes, 2012). To counter this, the researcher reflected on her own positionality, meaning what we know and believe, and questioned taken for granted assumptions (e.g. about women's careers, leadership and lived experiences in China), while acknowledging that her personal values and experiences cannot be entirely eliminated from research, they did not overshadow it.

After collecting a large amount of data, fruitful discoveries and many themes were emerging in the data processing. Reflexivity forces the researcher to re-examine her positioning in relation to methodology, theory, participants and self (Henwood, 2008). The researcher

should try to be aware of how her positioning affects the research designing and conducting, so she reflected on what is the motivation of this research and what are the underlying assumptions in this research, as well as why these theories were selected and how they were integrated in this research. In the process of coding, some descriptive and colloquial words were initially used to summarise the themes. By reflexivity, the researcher re-examined the words and replaced them with more concise and precise themes. These themes are in refined language and closely related with the underpinning theories in this research. Moreover, by writing down theoretical assumptions of the research and revisit regularly these throughout the research process, the researcher could note how the research may have changed during the process. By listening to the tape recordings and re-reading the transcripts, the researcher could reflect and consider how her presence or interaction may affect the process. The researcher also kept a research diary that noting down the thoughts and feelings about the research in different stages.

## **4.9. Quality Criteria**

The instruments of measurement should give the researchers enough confidence to minimise the measurement error (Field, 2013). The validity and reliability are the significant instruments to help the researcher. In this section, the validity and reliability of the survey and interviews is discussed separately under the following two subheadings.

### **4.9.1 Validity**

Validity refers to ‘the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by the proposed uses of tests’ (Cook & Beckman, 2006, p. 2). Thomas (2017, p. 146) defines validity as ‘the degree to which the instrument measures what it is supposed to be measuring’. The traditional criteria for validity find their roots in a positivist tradition, and to an extent, positivism has been defined by a systematic theory of validity. Within the

positivist terminology, validity was the result and culmination of other empirical conceptions such as universal laws, evidence, objectivity, truth, actuality, deduction, reason, fact and mathematical data etc. (Winter, 2000). A good internal validity means the theoretical construction of the proposed study could solve all the unfavourable factors that are affecting the correctness of the research results. Moreover, the well-structured research also means the results will apply to the whole population beyond the sample (Thomas, 2017). In order to ensure the validity of the research, the researcher should collect the data in different ways and use different kinds of evidence to support the viewpoint.

In the quantitative research context, validity means the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data. The function of validity in quantitative research is to ‘determine whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. In other words, does the research instrument allow you to hit ‘the bull’s eye’ of your research object?’ (Joppe, 2000, p. 1). There were more than three hundred participants from all around China who were involved in the survey, which could guarantee the various sources of evidence. In terms of the validity of each test in the questionnaire data analysis, different ways of the corresponding validity analysis are discussed in section 4.8.1.

Validity in qualitative research means the ‘appropriateness’ of the tools, processes, and data (Leung, 2015). It is recognised as a clear and accurate presentation of participants’ perspectives in qualitative research. The validity of qualitative research is dependent on different criteria, which are credibility, which parallels internal validity, and transferability, which parallels external validity (Bryman, 2016). In order to apply these criteria, Yin (2009) recommends the matching of patterns, the building of explanations, rival explanations being addressed and the use of logical models for internal validity. While for the external validity, it is recommended that the theory should be applied in single case studies and replication logic in multiple case studies (Yin, 2009).

#### **4.9.2 Reliability in Qualitative Research**

Reliability is about the consistency of the measurement. When a test is used to measure some behaviour, reliability is a major concern and it should be ensured the experiment is repeatable. This requires that when a different person performs the same experiment but in a different situation, the measurements are still reliable (Drost, 2011). Three forms of consistency should be considered in regard to reliability; the first is the reliability of the assessor, and the second is related to the measuring instrument, which should be highly reliable. The third form is the test-retest reliability; the results of the test on the same object on different occasions should remain unchanged (Brown & Knight, 1994).

In quantitative research, reliability refers to the exact replicability of the processes and the results while for qualitative research the essence of reliability lies with consistency (Leung, 2015). Thus, the consistency of measurement or the stability of measurement over a variety of conditions is a very important character for reliability (Drost, 2011). The design of the questionnaire in the current research referred to many experiments that have been repeated many times which has mentioned in section 4.5.3.1. Most of the questions and statements are from research that has been conducted and tested during the past years, so the consistency of the measurement can be ensured. The design of the questionnaire was influenced by authoritative research studies, which are discussed in section 4.5.3.1. and the permissions were acquired to reuse these questions. The reliability of individual survey questions is discussed in section 4.8.1. The concept of reliability in qualitative research is very different from in the quantitative research. Qualitative research is often criticised for lack of scientific rigor, lack of legitimacy of the methods used, lack of transparency in the analysis process, and the results are only a collection of personal opinions affected by the researchers' bias.

It is challenging to prove rigor in conducting qualitative research because there is no recognised consensus on the criteria for judging it. In order to ensure the 'trustworthiness' of the qualitative findings, the researcher was reflexive about potential biases, first when

sampling and much later when analysing the data, and through ongoing reflections to ensure sufficient depth was provided in the findings chapters, and comparisons were made to make sure that different perspectives were represented, and interpretations of data were consistent and transparent (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Validity and reliability are closely linked with each other. The confidence of the selected instrument or method for research clearly depends on both (Black, 1998). The researcher was mindful to use a combination of reliability and validity where appropriate. Sometimes reliability was appropriate to the circumstance, but validity more appropriate to other aspects of the study (Brown & Knight, 1994). For example, reliability was important for consistency in coding, whereas validity was relevant to procedures used for sampling and methods of data analysis.

#### **4.10. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations play a very important role in the research and are even more important for the participants. In qualitative research, the accuracy of the story is difficult to assess. This is an important ethical consideration in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Often stories recalled from memory become selective or even embellished. However, phenomenology concentrates on self-reported experiences, not mathematical analyses (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, perceiving meaning attribution is the key point, not judging the real story. Many documents are instructive to this process, including guidelines issued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the University of Reading ethics procedures.

The target group of this research are mature people, who are teachers in higher education in China. An information letter (see Appendix 5) and consent form (see Appendix 6) were given to all participants in the interviews for permission to conduct the research. In the

information letter, the procedures and measures of the research project were explained, so that they understand its potential impact. Participation in this study was voluntary and the interview took approximately one hour of their time. With their permission, the interviews were recorded. Participants could change their mind at any time without any repercussions. All the recordings were transcribed and translated from Chinese to English by the PhD researcher and these anonymous translated versions were reviewed by a PhD student who majored in English.

This research conforms to the University of Reading ethics procedures, and every participant's confidentiality and all relevant research data were protected throughout the whole research. All the information provided by the participants in this study was kept confidential and could only be accessed by the researcher herself. All the data collected were held in strict confidence, and no real names were used in this study. All the participants' personal details were anonymised in all the transcripts and translations. The records of this research are stored on a password-protected computer and the records will be destroyed at the end of the project. The results of this study will be published at national and international conferences and in the form of written reports and articles. In addition, this information will not be used for reasons other than academic research.

#### **4.11. Limitations of the Study**

Considering the formulation of research aims and objectives, this research only explored the career experiences of Chinese female academics working in universities in China to understand barriers and opportunities to career progression, and the strategies women adopt to progress their careers, if relevant. Thus, the objectives are academic women in higher education. In the questionnaire survey, the participants were defined as the women who have worked in higher education for more than five years. In the interview, the criteria are women in middle or senior level of leadership, which needed to be met for them to be interviewees.

Therefore, the females who had just started their career and those who had already occupied a senior leadership position were excluded from this research. At the beginning of the study, it was planned to collect more interview data from teachers of first-class universities, but due to the lack of relevant network resources, only three of the interviewees were from flagship universities in China.

Although the explanatory sequential mixed method was adopted in the research and the questionnaire was responded to by a large number of participants, compared with the whole population, the scope and sampling of the study was limited. China is a large country, and there are great differences in economic development between the eastern and the western regions, so there are differences in the development of higher education in different areas. The interview process can also be clearly distinguished that teachers from different regions have different explanations and experiences to some extent. The pressure and challenges faced by the teachers with better higher education resources are different from those faced by teachers from remote areas with poor educational resources. The practical limitation is that it was not possible for one researcher to interview a larger sample. However, the 16 participants in the qualitative study and the 391 respondents to the questionnaire provide a good sample size. In addition, there are insufficient previous studies with a Chinese background to identify the scope of works that have been done so far in the research area. The previous findings are often seen as the foundation for the researchers to build their own research and to achieve their research objectives, but it also can be treated as an opportunity to fill the research gap.

It is unfortunate that the study did not include more quantitative tests, because most of the questions are multiple-choice questions, which are not suitable for various tests, such as regression analysis or applied to a general linear model. In the setting of variables, scale variables are more suitable for testing, but most of the variables for grouping are nominal variables, which is not applicable to some tests. The total number of 391 valid questionnaires

should have provided abundant information, but the results are not as rich as expected. It is hoped that the numerical factors and classification factors could be considered in the future design of the questionnaire so as to make the questionnaire design more convenient and excavate more quantitative outcomes. In addition, the questionnaire lacked exploration of the participants' career strategies and aspirations and the participants' understanding of leaders and leadership. Thus, the results of the quantitative part could not provide corresponding answers to the first two research questions.

Due to the lack of a consistent definition of the mid-career stage in China, and the retirement time of Chinese women, which is much earlier than that in most other countries, the mid-career stage appears much earlier. This means that the mid-career stage findings may not easily correlate with those of other studies focusing on the mid-career stage. Also, the early entry level for many of these academic women was relatively low, so the barriers they face now due to lack of qualifications may not be the same as for women in future studies in China or other countries where the entry level is higher. However, this study may contribute to other similar contexts in Asia and be beneficial to those countries whose higher education system is established late and still developing.

The last limitation for this gender-related study is the lack of male participants in this research. Different genders may have different perspectives and opinions on the same issue, for instance, male scholars may have different views on career paths and promotion opportunities in the higher education system. Besides, men could have different opinions on women's career paths in universities and their barriers and opportunities for career progression. Especially, the male leaders' views on the woman leadership and the male teachers' views on their female leaders are worth exploring.

#### **4.12. Summary**

This chapter introduced the rationale and explanations of the research methodology and discussed the reasons why the explanatory sequential mixed methods was adopted. This research was divided into two stages: a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview. After that, this chapter also explained the pilot studies, as well as how to carry out the sampling, data collection and analysis strategies. In addition, this chapter also described the key ethical issues of this research, such as informed consent and confidentiality, as well as the limitations of the current research. The next chapter will present the analysis of the questionnaire and interview results.

## **Chapter Five. Findings**

### **5.1. Introduction**

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of women in the exercise of leadership in Chinese higher education. In accordance with the sequential mixed methods design of this study, quantitative data were first collected, using WJX online to disseminate the questionnaire. The 391 participants in the survey and 16 interviewees were mid-career academic women in HEIs in China. In this research, the mid-career academic women refer to women who have worked in higher education for more than five years and are in the middle level of leadership in HEIs in China. The survey results were then analysed in SPSS version 23. In the second stage, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the 16 participants who gave consent to take part in the interview. NVivo version 12 software was used to analyse the qualitative data. This chapter outlines the findings of both stages of the study in response to the main research question:

What strategies do mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to further their career?

And answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1. How do the mid-career academic women in higher education describe and construct their academic career trajectories?

RQ2. What personal and professional motivators influence the career choices mid-career academic women in higher education make?

RQ3. How do the mid-career academic women in higher education describe their current career aspirations?

RQ4. What are the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership experienced by mid-career academic women?

RQ5. What strategies, if any, do the mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to overcome barriers and pursue career opportunities?

This chapter begins with the presentation of quantitative findings, followed by the presentation of qualitative findings, which is divided into five parts corresponding to the five questions, which are: 5.4. RQ 1, 5.5. RQ 2, 5.6. RQ 3, 5.7. RQ 4, and 5.8. RQ 5. In every answer to the research questions, the findings are presented mainly based on the analysis from the interviews with the integration of the quantitative findings. The main theoretical implications and contributions of this study will be discussed in depth in the next chapter (Chapter 6). The questionnaire participants are described in section 4.7.3. and the profile of the interviewees and other supplementary information are presented in section 4.7.5. in Chapter 4.

## 5.2. The Findings of the Survey

The information on the participants' demographic and general personal information has been reported in section 4.7.3, which covered Question 1 to Question 12. The second part of the questionnaire (Q12 to Q19, see Appendix 1) deals with the feelings and comments of the participants on the key issues related to gender differences in the workplace, the leadership and the management practice of their leaders and their opinions on the questions related to career. Table 5.1. presents the female academics' attitude towards their career planning: 40.41% chose the neutral expression, which was labelled as 'somewhat clear', and 24.3% responded 'not so clear'. Those who claimed they were either extremely clear or very clear accounted for a smaller proportion. Only three people thought they were not clear at all about career planning and had no plans for their career.

**Table 5.1. The Number and Proportion of the Attitudes Towards Career Planning**

Options	Number	Proportion
Extremely clear	71	18.16%
Very clear	64	16.37%
Somewhat clear	158	40.41%

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Not so clear	95	24.30%
Not at all clear	3	0.77%

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It is significant to determine the relationship between the women's background and the clarity of their career planning. Thus, the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was adopted to identify the relationship between their attitude towards their career planning and key demographic variables, such as age, educational background and academic titles, and years of working in the HEIs. Of all the paired tests, current title and education background showed a significant difference in terms of the academic women's attitudes towards career planning ( $p < 0.05$ ). A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of different academic titles on their career planning description. It revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the clarity on career planning description between at least two groups, which were Teaching Assistants and Professors [ $F (5, 385) = 7.203, p = 0.000$ ]. Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons found that the mean value of clarity about career planning was significantly different between Teaching Assistants ( $M = 3.00, SD = 0.910$ ) and Professors ( $M = 2.05, SD = 0.973$ ). The Eta squared value ( $\eta$ ) was 0.219, and the  $\eta^2$  value was 0.48, which indicated a large effect. In other words, there was a difference in attitudes towards career planning depending on participants' current academic title; the lower level title holders seemed clearer about their career planning than the other groups. Teaching Assistants generally had more confidence than Associate Professors and Professors. Likewise, Lecturers had more confidence than Associate Professors and Professors. This indicates that women with higher academic title were more cautious about answering the question regarding career planning.

Similarly, a one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of education background on the academic women's attitudes towards their clarity of career planning. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in their feeling on the clarity of career planning between at least two groups, which were College degree

holders and PhD degree holders [ $F(4, 386) = 4.858, p = 0.001$ ]. Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons found that the mean value of the clarity of career planning was significantly different between College degree holders ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.707$ ) and PhD degree holders ( $M = 2.37, SD = 1.107$ ). The Eta squared value ( $\eta$ ) was 0.292, and the  $\eta^2$  value was 0.86, which indicated a large effect. This difference indicates that women with a Master's degree had more confidence than those who held a Doctorate degree.

Question 13 sought to elicit insight into participants' views of men's and women's roles in society. It aimed for individuals of both sexes to freely develop and enhance themselves in their work environments through formal expressions and informal cultural elements. The discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 showed that traditional attitudes toward the roles of women and men prevail in Chinese culture, so the survey sought to understand if this applied to this research. Table 5.2 shows the majority of participants aligned with traditional views, for example, that women should be cherished and protected by men (nearly 70%), but they believed society treats women differently (8.19%). On the other hand, as many as 84.4% of the respondents believed that better measures should be taken to achieve equality between the sexes in the workplace. This contradiction reflects that in the traditional culture, women were vulnerable groups in society and needed to be protected, but the idea of gender equality in the social trend has had a profound impact on these women as well.

Furthermore, only a small proportion of respondents (17.13%) thought that discrimination of women is no longer a problem in this country and even less (11%) agreed that society treats men and women the same way. This indicates that the women in this survey were aware of gender inequality in the workplace. Besides, in the statements of comparison between men and women (statement (b) and (c)), people with these three different attitudes were almost evenly distributed. There were slightly more people who disagree than agree, which meant the participants believed that men and women were equally competitive at the leadership position.

**Table 5.2. The Opinions on Social Attitudes Towards Men and Women**

N (%)	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree, nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
a) Women should be cherished and protected by men.	10 (2.56)	22 (5.63)	88 (22.51)	148 (37.85)	123 (31.46)
b) Men are less likely to fall apart in emergencies than women are.	41 (10.49)	113 (28.9)	130 (33.25)	84 (21.48)	23 (5.88)
c) Men are more suited to leadership than women.	42 (10.74)	110 (28.13)	123 (31.46)	99 (25.32)	17 (4.35)
d) Discrimination of women is no longer a problem in this country.	68 (17.39)	176 (45.01)	80 (20.46)	51 (13.04)	16 (4.09)
e) Society treats men and women the same way.	81 (20.72)	176 (45.01)	91 (23.27)	31 (7.93)	12 (3.07)
f) Better measures should be taken to achieve equality (between the sexes) in the workplace.	6 (1.53)	13 (3.32)	42 (10.74)	165 (42.2)	165 (42.2)

Table 5.3 shows the result of Question 14 in the survey, which aims to explore the participants' views in their current institutes and the feelings of their managers (leaders). Generally, most of the participants held a positive attitude towards managers at their institution, and more than 40% of them agreed to some extent with each of the six statements shown. About 26% of the respondents held a neutral attitude towards statements (a) and (b), and above 30% of them held a neutral attitude towards statements (c) (d) (e) (g). They generally agreed with these six statements, indicating that the respondents predominantly agreed with the leadership practice of their current managers. The purpose of statement (f) was to find out whether the respondents thought that promotion was fair in their working environment. Over 70% of them held a neutral or positive attitude, and only 8.44% strongly disagreed with that. This result shows that the vast majority of participants believed that their

working environment is relatively fair and full of opportunities. Statement (h) was about the respondents' self-evaluation on whether they can well-balance their work and life; over half (54.22%) expressed that they could balance the relationship well, one-third of them held a neutral attitude and the rest (15.34%) disagreed with this statement. On the whole, these results showed that the participants' working environment and their managers' leadership practice were basically good, and individuals can balance their work and life better. This indicates a relatively high level of satisfaction with their current work.

**Table 5.3. The Views on the Statements of the Respondents' Institutes**

N (%)	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither disagree, nor agree	Agree	Strongly agree
a) senior management in this institution are open and accessible.	18 (4.6)	84 (21.48)	104 (26.6)	164 (41.94)	21 (5.37)
b) In my experience, managers at the institution have effective people skills.	11 (2.81)	57 (14.58)	102 (26.09)	187 (47.83)	34 (8.7)
c) I think it is important for staff with management responsibilities to have effective people skills.	4 (1.02)	5 (1.28)	22 (5.63)	190 (48.59)	170 (43.48)
d) In my experience, managers in my department are good at adapting their management style to get the most out of individuals in their team.	24 (6.14)	70 (17.9)	130 (33.25)	131 (33.5)	36 (9.21)
e) I feel the managers in my department take equality and diversity issues seriously.	19 (4.86)	64 (16.37)	139 (35.55)	141 (36.06)	28 (7.16)
f) On the whole, I believe our promotion processes are fair and based on merit.	33 (8.44)	75 (19.18)	113 (28.9)	156 (39.9)	14 (3.58)
g) I feel my manager supports flexible working (such as part-time working, job-share arrangements, home-working, etc).	22 (5.63)	88 (22.51)	120 (30.69)	142 (36.32)	19 (4.86)

h) I feel able to strike the right balance between my work responsibilities and my home life.	11 (2.81)	49 (12.53)	119 (30.43)	192 (49.1)	20 (5.12)
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Table 5.4 identified the main criteria for women being promoted based on managers' views. Among the eight criteria, outstanding work capability obtained the highest percentage of responses with 96.16%, followed by rich work experience with 82.35%. Other important items included good relations with senior leaders, colleagues and fellow employees and excellent achievement. Some people claimed that open competition for a position could eliminate the gender bias. Interestingly, neither having a higher educational degree nor senior leaders' emphasis on women's promotion in the organisation was perceived as a major factor for a woman being promoted.

**Table 5.4. Factors Affecting Promotion Prospects Based on Managers' Views**

Promotion factors	N	(%)
Outstanding work capability	376	96.16
Rich work experience	322	82.35
Good relations with colleagues/employees	297	75.96
Excellent achievement	251	64.19
Good relations with senior leaders	228	58.31
Open competition for position with less gender bias	180	46.04
High educational degree	122	31.20
Leaders' emphasis on promoting women	73	18.67
Other (please specify)	0	0

Table 5.5 presents the participants' self-assessment on their competency of handling the current job and their career development opportunities. More than half (53%) responded with confidence regarding handling the job, and around half of them believed that they had

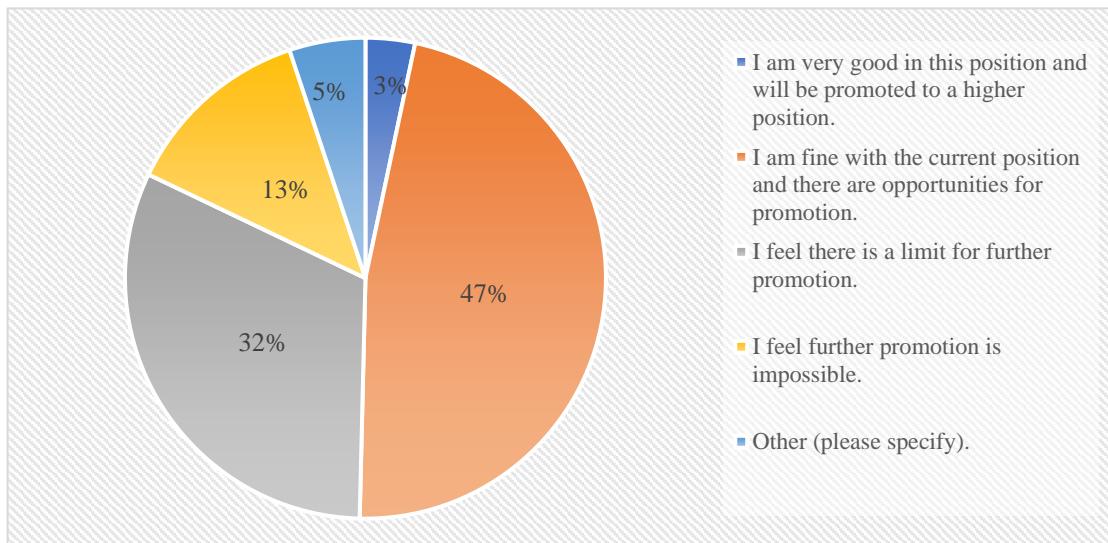
further potential. Others felt pressure in handling the job; they either felt that they needed to improve their skills and/or knowledge to be able to handle the job or to be demoted.

**Table 5.5.** *Self-assessment on Handling the Current Job*

Options	N	(%)
I feel the job is suitable for me, and I still have more potential	129	32.99
I feel the job is suitable for me	80	20.46
I feel the pressure, but I could overcome that by adjustment	114	29.16
I do my best, but there are some tasks being completed with imperfection	60	15.35
I do not feel the job is suitable for me, and I need to improve my capability, knowledge and experience	7	1.79
I feel I am not able to handle the job, and I need to move myself to a lower level of job for several years	0	0
Other (please specify)	1	0.26

Figure 5.1 shows the participants' views on the comparison of their performance and promotion opportunities with those of their male counterparts. It reflects that 60% of the participants believed that they were very good at their job and had further promotion opportunities. It is apparent from these results that the participants generally had confidence in themselves and were looking forward to further developing their career.

**Figure 5.1.** *Self-assessment of Their Career Development by the Participants*



As can be seen from Table 5.6., broadly nearly one third of the women believed that they performed better than their male colleagues but overall, the results suggest that opinion was split on equal opportunities provision and most recognised men are at an advantage in the workplace when it comes to promotion. The participants who choose 'Other' and fill in their own opinions are diversified; some said that women perform well, but men have more opportunities for promotion; some stated that both men and women perform well and have good opportunities for promotion. Some participants said they were not interested in promotion, while some said they could not judge who performs better because other factors, such as opportunities and connections, would affect promotion.

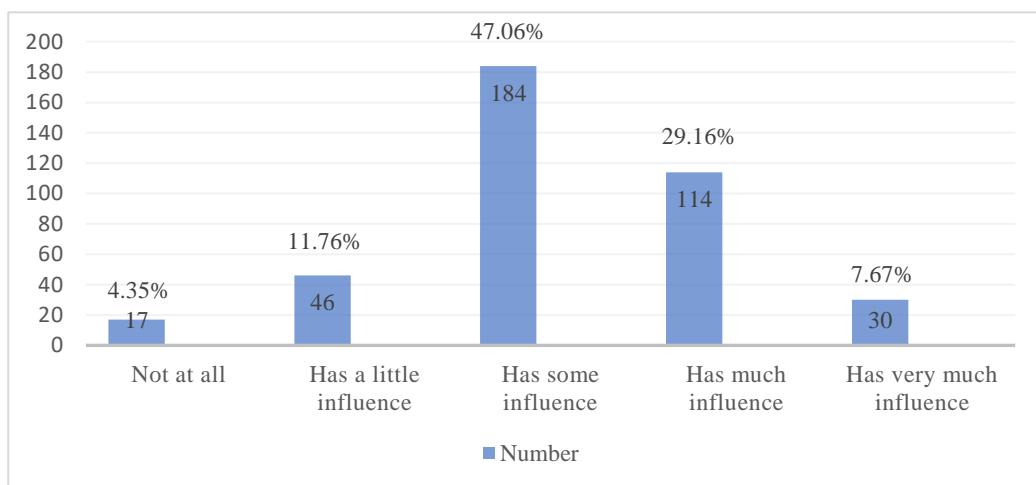
**Table 5.6. The Statements Best Describing How the Participants Compare Themselves to Male Colleagues**

Options	N	(%)
My performance is better than my male colleagues, and I will have a better promotion opportunity than they.	34	8.7
My performance is better than my male colleagues, but they have better promotion opportunities than me.	132	33.76
The performance of my male colleagues is better than me, and they will have better promotion opportunities than me.	61	15.6

The performance of my male colleagues is better than mine, but I will have better promotion opportunity than they.	6	1.53
The organization has equal promotion opportunities regardless of gender differences.	141	36.06
Other.	17	4.35

The survey (Question 19) also examined the influence of pregnancy on the current managerial position and further promotion opportunities of women (see Figure 5.2). The majority of participants believed pregnancy would have some influence on their current leadership position and/or on further promotion while only a few women managers believed that there would be no influence at all on their current position and on further promotions (4.35%).

**Figure 5.2. The Influence of Pregnancy on the Women's Current Managerial Position and Further Promotion Opportunities**



A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare whether different education backgrounds (the five types, which are College degree, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, Doctorate degree and other educational background that prefer not to say) were significantly related to the academic women's attitudes towards the influence of pregnancy on the women's current managerial position and further promotion opportunities.

There was a significant difference of education background on the academic women's attitudes towards the influence of pregnancy at the  $p < .05$  level for the five conditions [ $F(4, 386) = 3.682, p = 0.006$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the College degree holders ( $M = 4.50, SD = 0.707$ ) was significantly different than Bachelor's degree holders ( $M = 2.95, SD = 0.925$ ). This indicates that College degree holders generally thought pregnancy is more likely to have an impact on their position and promotion opportunities than Bachelor's degree and Master's degree holders. Meanwhile, Doctorate graduates also believed this was so more than Bachelor's degree and Master's degree holders ( $M = 3.44, SD = 0.896$ ). However, there were only two College degree holders in this investigation, so this result should be treated with caution.

### **5.2.1. Summary of the Survey Results**

The overall picture of women in mid-career leadership position in Chinese higher education is indicative that they generally believed that they did a good job and had promotion opportunities. Most people believed that the barriers for promoting women were hidden, rather than explicit. Most women in leadership positions believed that outstanding work capabilities and excellent achievements were the most important basis upon which women would be promoted, as well as rich experience, which would also support a promotion. The majority of the participants felt confident in terms of managing their job and anticipated further promotion opportunities. However, a certain proportion of female academics felt that while they believed that they performed better than their male counterparts, their male colleagues would have more opportunities for promotion than they would. A smaller proportion of women managers opposed this view. Therefore, a degree of discrimination against the promotion of women still exists in many institutions.

In the following sections, the discussion is divided according to the five research questions, which explore these themes in more depth through qualitative interviews with a smaller sample of 16 mid-career female academics working in Chinese universities.

### **5.3. RQ1: How Do the Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education Describe and Construct Their Academic Career Trajectories?**

The mid-career academic women had similar career experience on the whole. After finishing studies in higher education, they started work in the sector progressing to their current mid-career stage. However, a common theme emerged showing it was difficult for the women to progress further than their current position or title for various reasons. Some of them did not have a qualified educational background, some could not meet the requirements for promotion (such as the publications), and some felt that higher leadership positions meant more responsibilities than they liked. The following sections will describe the 16 interviewees' career trajectories, followed by important stages in their career path.

#### **5.3.1. Career Trajectories**

The minimum threshold for entering a university job is a Bachelor's degree, so all of the participants had higher education qualifications of at least that level. Typically, the interviewees narrated their experience starting at the undergraduate stage and progressing in time sequence to postgraduate studies. A common theme in the data concerned changes in the entry qualifications to an academic position that had occurred since they began their career (around year 2003). All 16 interviewees noted that the requirements for academic qualifications were relatively low when they entered higher education. This was especially so in the 1990s, when a participant with a major in education then stood a high chance of entering the university to work in an academic or administrative role.

However, a related theme emerging from the analysis of the interview data was that despite the many years they had worked in higher education they struggled to progress further; for example, interviewees could not access the position of Associate Professor or above because they did not have a Doctorate degree, and seven interviewees had been Associate Professors for years but could not be promoted to Professors. One factor holding these women back

was their qualifications; however, this had not prevented all of the women from progressing to professorial or senior leadership roles. One interviewee (*Zhao*) had not progressed beyond a Bachelor's degree. She was the eldest among the interviewees and was close to retirement, and her professional title was a Professor. She had been teaching in higher education for 25 years and had been the Dean of the Foreign Languages College for 12 years since 2007. Her experience is a special case, because her workplace carried out personnel reform relatively late, and her qualifications reached the standard to be a Professor in 2007. However, in the current situation recruiting teachers in higher education institutions, the most basic qualification for teaching and research posts is a Doctoral degree. The minimum educational requirement for recruiting administrative personnel now in universities is an MA degree.

Among the younger interviewers (from late 20s to 30s years old), the only exception was *Chu*. Due to the serious brain drain in the northwest border region in China, it was difficult for the colleges and universities in some places there to recruit qualified teachers according to the general standards. Therefore, the undergraduate graduates could stay in the university as a Counsellor if they only passed some tests. As a Master's degree holder, she took on more teaching and administrative responsibilities. Specifically, *Chu* was an MA graduate. According to the general standard in most of the provinces, such a degree holder can only be a Counsellor in other universities. However, due to the lack of university teachers in the most northwest province (and a large number of talents were lost in her workplace), teachers chose to develop in big cities in the east and south of China rather than stay in the underdeveloped areas. She also mentioned an example here:

*'...just in 2013...in 2014 and 2015...all three Professors of psychology and pedagogy have left. We have no Professors or Associate Professors in our department... we are suffering two difficult years...many colleges and universities are now recruiting undergraduates as administrative staff'.*

‘在 2013, 2014 和 2015 年...心理教育学院的三个教授都走了。我们学院就没有教授或者副教授了...我们经历了特别困难的两年...现在很多大专院校都在招聘本科毕业生做行政人员。’

But teachers who went directly to higher education institutions after graduation were also facing new challenges. Due to the increasing requirements for teachers' qualifications, the female teachers chose to continue to study after taking part in the work. Only *Sun, Wu, Feng, Chen, Chu, Han* and *Yang* chose to go directly to further study after graduation, and these teachers were relatively younger (under 40 years old) among the interviewees. They knew that if they wanted to teach in the university, they must have a graduate degree or above at a very young age, so they went for the MA degree directly after graduation. Other interviewees went on to study for a Master's degree or Doctor's degree because this was needed for their work. In addition to seeking higher attainments in academic qualifications, they also paid attention to overseas visits and exchanges. Nine of the interviewees had overseas experiences, and many had participated in overseas study and had been to more than one foreign country. Among those who had never been abroad, *Chu* and *Jiang* had plans to study abroad in the near future.

The examinations were often mentioned when they prepared to start their career in universities; the examination was divided into a written examination and interview. But this trend only started after the year 2000. The teachers who started work in the 1990s had to arrange internships in the school after graduation; then they could be assigned to work as Teaching Assistants, and then follow the promotion route. Moreover, the Doctoral graduates had a favourable condition, which was a ‘golden two years’ for promotion to the Associate Professors in the first two years of work. If the candidate could meet the requirements of the promotion, it was relatively easy to be nominated as an Associate Professor. If they missed the ‘golden two years’, the requirement of working hours increased, so as the academic tasks to be completed. The next round of selection would be more difficult than at the first trial, but the increase in the tasks would be within a reasonable range.

*Wu* was an Associate Professor who started work in 1999. She recalled that,

*'When you enter, you can only be a Teaching Assistant, and then you have to be evaluated as a Lecturer. The Lecturer may be two years'.*

‘你刚进去的时候职称只能是助教，然后要评讲师，讲师可能是两年。’

*Feng* was a new Lecturer who started work in 2019. She described her experience,

*'...our university has an Associate Professor's appointment within two years for new employees who are PhD holders...If you didn't finish these within the first two years that you enter the university, the normal evaluation will involve more quota or higher requirements'.*

‘.....我们大学对新进的员工，是博士的话，有两年内有一个副教授的定职.....这是两年内一定要定职，如果不定职的话，就按照正常的评审就会涉及到名额或者跟评比这种要求会更高一点。’

In terms of the promotion experience, or the evaluation of professional titles in this context, the main indicators were the number of class hours, the number of monographs published, and research projects. Among these indicators, the number of class hours was within a reasonable range which did not concern the interviewees. But the most mentioned concern was related to academic research; the detailed description is in the following section on publications in RQ4 (see section 5.6.3.) The interviewees generally expressed their stress and worry in terms of writing and publishing articles, which could be a major barrier in the promotion to a higher professional title.

Two of the interviewees had experienced the change of post from a Counsellor to a Lecturer, because they felt they were too old to take more responsibilities. They wanted to spare more time to take care of their families. For example, *Yang* started work in 2009 and had recently changed her post. These were her reasons:

*'I'm a little older, and the new Counsellors are coming. I went directly to the office director's post...I can put some energy into the family and children, because there was no time to take care of my children and my family when I was a Counsellor'.*

‘……年龄也大一点了，辅导员岗位也来了新人了，我就直接到了办公室主任岗位……我可以在家庭孩子身上都投放一些精力了，因为原来辅导员的时候根本没有时间照顾孩子，照顾家里。’

The other reason is that the career development and career prospects of the Counsellor were not clear, and subjected to professional and academic constraints, Lecturer was the highest academic title for Counsellor, so they chose to transfer. As *Sun*, who managed to transfer to a Lecturer post after years of being a Counsellor from 2010, pointed out:

*'Maybe you've been at the Lecturer's level, but you can't go up because there is no related major for you. There are no uniform regulations and norms in the whole province, and in the whole country. So many Counsellors jump to other positions because their promotion mechanism is not perfect'.*

‘可能你评到讲师这个级别就已经因为上面再往上拼的话，这个系列他没有相关的专业。但是他这块辅导员他是全国包括全省目前还没有统一的规定、规范。所以很多辅导员在跳槽，就跳到别的岗位都是由于就是他晋升机制不是很(完善)。’

As she said, there were no unified regulations or norms of the promotion of Counsellors across the whole country. So many Counsellors were considering the job-hopping and jump to other positions due to the uncertainty of the career prospect.

Among the above responsibilities, only the last two were related to the Counsellors' own research and teaching. Counsellors needed to provide students with scientific career planning and employment guidance and related services to help students establish a correct concept of employment. Therefore, several respondents mentioned they were teaching relevant courses such as ‘career planning for college students’. Counsellors' research activities mainly focused on learning the basic theory of ideological and political education, as well

as related discipline knowledge, participating in academic exchange activities, and participating in the research of ideological and political education topics or projects inside and outside the school. This is the reason why the interviewees pointed out that the professional development is limited.

#### **5.4. RQ2: What Personal and Professional Motivators Influence the Career Choices Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Make?**

This research question is also an interview question for interviewees in their professional life. When they answered other interview questions, or described their own experiences, they often inadvertently mentioned the important decisions in life, which were influenced by who or what they experienced. Some experiences or choices may have changed the trajectory of their lives. There are three sections dealing with their answers: (1) the analysis on why they wanted to be a teacher in the university; (2) discussing the important people or experiences that influenced their choice; and (3) a discussion on their changing jobs or engaging in other professions.

##### **5.4.1. Career Choice**

In answering ‘why do you choose to be a teacher in university?’, most of the interviewees said that was their personal choice, while some thought that it was influenced by their families and the traditional ideas that they thought teacher is a good job for women.

From the purely personal level, *Zhao* has summarised well the significance of being a teacher, whether from the moral level or the material level. She explained,

*‘Maybe it’s because the job is decent. Maybe it’s because of the salary or the pleasure of helping others. I think it reflects a little of my own value, in addition to teaching... I may be more or less a bit gifted in management...’.*

‘…也许可能是因为这个工作比较体面，可能因为工资或者是助人为乐这些。我觉得是能够体现一点自己的价值，除了教学以外…可能在管理方面多多少少可能还是有一点天赋的…。’

Several interviewees answered that being a teacher was their own wish. For example, *Zheng* said, *‘I always like to be a teacher. This is what I always thought before’*. Likewise, *Shen*'s father was a teacher. When she was a child, she had the opportunity to listen to her father's lecture in the classroom. *‘At that time, I had such a dream. I think the profession of teacher is there waiting for me’*. Therefore, her dream had been to be a teacher since then, which was a dream that now came true. *Han* also said that because she had been working in the student union of the university since she was an undergraduate student, she liked to do student work, and she liked the feeling of being a ‘big sister’. Moreover, her first career choice after graduation was also student work. She responded,

*‘I always feel that being able to do this job is a matter of great honour and satisfaction, especially when you are a grass-roots Counsellor, because you will deal with more students, and then the feedback from students will make you feel that everything is worth it and is very satisfied... I feel that I am doing a very meaningful job with a sense of mission, honour and significance’*.

‘然后也一直觉得能够做这份工作是非常有荣誉感，很有满足感的事情，尤其是在做基层辅导员的时候，因为会和学生打交道比较多，然后学生给你的这种回馈，会让你觉得所有的一切都是值得的，都是很满足的…都会觉得说自己的工作非常有使命感，非常有荣誉感非常有意义的一份工作。’

As for the choice of being a teacher, nine out of 16 interviewees gave surprisingly consistent answers. They thought that working in the university, or being a university teacher, was a stable job, with less pressure, more relaxation, a good working environment and receiving good treatment, as well as a decent job. *Zhao* replied,

*'...especially good for women, it is possible to look after their husband and raise their children during the holidays...which does not affect the family care'.*

‘尤其作为女性来讲，可能假期相夫教子，也就是说既能工作还能相夫教子，不太影响对照顾家庭。’

*Qian* had the same idea:

*'I just want to find a more stable job, because I still think that girls should find a stable job and then live a stable life'.*

‘就想找一份比较稳定的工作，因为觉得当时自己还是觉得是女孩子找一份稳定的工作比较好。’

Families will also be more supportive of women in educational jobs. As *Feng* said,

*'I thought that when I grow up, I will have more free time in my job as a teacher...Maybe one reason is that it is teaching and educating people, and there will be more free time as well... So, I chose this profession, mainly because of family factors'.*

‘以后长大了就想着老师这个工作可能就会比较有更自由的时间多一点，那时候是想的是这样的...可能老师这个职业一个是教书育人，还有一个自由的时间会多一点...所以就选择了这个职业，主要还是家庭因素影响比较多。’

*Yang* also got support from her families, remarking,

*'...to be frank, I want to work in the university, because the salary is also good. There are winter and summer holidays, (for) girls (the job) is stable, and then the working environment is more civilized... so that the families can feel (this work is) more stable'.*

‘其实说的直白一点，就是想在大学里工作，因为大学待遇也还不错，有寒暑假，(对)女孩(来说)稳定，然后工作环境更加文明一点.....让家人感觉比较安稳。’

More importantly, most of these ideas were from their parents or the older generations. For instance, *Sun* said,

*‘...the profession of teachers in colleges or universities is highly respected and the most tempting is that it has summer and winter holidays. As far as my parents are concerned, they think life would be easier for a girl to be a teacher.’*

‘首先教师这个职业是很受人尊敬的，而且最受人诱惑的，它是有两个寒暑假，你没有入职以前你是这样想的。对于我父母而言，觉得当老师做教师的话，可能更轻松一些，作为一个女孩子来讲的话。’

*Wu’s choice was also influenced by her parents,*

*‘They (my parents) work in the university, and they think it’s good for girls to be teachers and go to normal school. This is a relatively stable job, and the pressure is not so great’.*

‘他们(父母)在大学里工作，还有他们觉得女孩子你去学师范以后当老师很好，这是一份比较稳定，相对压力不是那么太大的工作。’

However, many teachers said that after embarking on the academic road, they found that the so-called ‘relaxed’ work was not easy. Apart from the usual teaching and administrative affairs, they had very little time for their own research. They often used weekends and holidays to conduct their own research and made efforts to pursue the professional titles. During the winter holiday and summer holiday, they were tired of dealing with the unfinished work and research projects with nearly no time for husbands and children. This also reflected that they did not acknowledge the specific work content of this occupation before they made the choice. Under the influence of the so-called ‘high salary and leisure’ work, which was widespread among the public, they chose this career path.

From their experiences, the influence of family on their career choices played a significant role. There was a traditional view, ‘keep the girls around parents’, which was a common concept among the elder generation. One reason was the family ties. On the other hand, the elder generation has a traditional idea of bringing up children for the purpose of being looked

after in their old age. Once the parents are too old and weak to take care of themselves, it would be convenient for their children to take care of them if they are around, preferably in the same city or the same region. This explained why many respondents said that ‘parents want me to stay with them’. Families live together in harmony: maintaining a good family relationship was the pursuit of many people and the traditional Chinese values.

Similarly, because of the influence of traditional concepts, no matter whether they had been engaged in the education industry or not, the elders generally thought that the profession of teachers was a relaxed, low-pressure and decent job; more specifically, it was a better job for girls. This was mainly because of the traditional idea that ‘men are in charge of the outside world while the woman looks after the house’, which indicated that women should spend more time and energy in their families and take care of their children. In addition, university teachers have an advantage that they did not have fixed working hours per day. This meant that women could take more responsibility to take care of the family. These factors would lead them to choose the profession of being a teacher, whether by themselves or following the opinions of their families.

In addition to the factors just mentioned, another possible explanation for this was that these interviewees have a certain degree of prejudice and stereotype on other occupations in companies or enterprises. Some interviewees assumed that the enterprises or companies only pursue economic benefits and enterprise revenue. While the conversations among teachers was relatively noble, teachers would link economic benefits with their own research and professional titles. They also thought that the company's environment was sophisticated with complicated interpersonal relationships; there were ‘intrigues’ and the competition, which was too fierce to cope with. They reckoned it was difficult for them to survive and develop in such a complex and brutal environment. As *Yang* described,

*‘The working environment is more civilised. At least, we don’t have to attract customers in the society, so that the family can feel more secure’.*

‘然后工作环境更加文明一点，至少不用在社会上去拉客户，让家人感觉比较安稳。’

*Sun* has a similar view,

*‘People in enterprises may pay more attention to economic efficiency. Income level, of course, teachers will also talk about it, but when we talk about it, for example, my title, title and student issues, of course, these things are linked to your income, but not the same’.*

‘企业的人可能更注重的是效益，就是经济效益。收入水平，当然老师也会谈论，但是大家谈论的时候，更多的是比方说我的职称，评职称申课题，当然这些东西都和你的收入是挂钩的，但是就是直接反映出来大家谈论的话题还是不太一样的。’

When talking about the working environment later, *Sun* also answered:

*‘... but I think in such an environment as college, in the humanistic environment, women are still being taken care of. It may be different from those companies. Yes, then in fact, for all female teachers, we are still more caring for women’.*

‘...但是我觉得在高校这样一个环境当中，人文环境当中，女性还是倍受照顾的。他可能和那些公司企业又不太一样。对，然后其实大家对女性教育所有都是教师而言，大家还是比较照顾的女性的。’

Hence, *Yang* gave a vivid example. Her own family had been engaged in business for generations, and her father and grandfather were both engaged in business. She had been in business herself, and she thought that she had the potential to inherit the business. However, in the year of her graduation, there was a recruitment opportunity in the university, and her parents persuaded her to stay in the university to work. Although she was not a major in this profession, they still thought it was a good choice. She talked about how her family persuaded her:

*'They drove hundreds of kilometres from our hometown, directly to the downstairs of my dormitory. After standing and talking at the door of the dormitory for more than two hours, they told me that I had to stay. Later, out of trust in my parents, I was also very ignorant and clueless at that time, but in fact, of course, I did not refuse, so I chose to stay in the university later'.*

‘(他们)开车开了几百公里，从我们老家直接开到我宿舍楼下，等我在宿舍楼下站着，说了两个多小时，跟我说必须得留下。后来出于对父母的信任，也当时其实也懵懵懂懂的，但是其实也是当然也不拒绝，后来就选择了。’

Because she knew that she was the kind of person who would put all her heart into the career once she became a teacher, she had rejected being a teacher at the beginning. In the undergraduate course to choose a major, there was a chance, but she refused, just to avoid taking the responsibility of being a teacher. She said,

*'As a result, after I got my Master's degree, I still had a chance. Maybe I knew in my heart that there was..... However, I still feel that I can't leave this position, I chose this position, because after my education, I really put my heart and soul on the students'.*

‘结果后来上了硕士之后，还是机缘巧合，可能还是内心里知道有.....怎么说还是觉得离不开这个岗位，还是选择了教育岗位，因为做了教育之后，我真的是把全身心都放在了学生身上。’

The commercial enterprises have their own characteristics, such as fierce competition and the survival of the fittest, and the environment is relatively complex compared with the field of education. Yang's family had been in business for generations, so her families could understand the hardships of this industry. Out of the protection of their children, the elder wanted to make her life more stable with less pressure, and the elder suggested the younger generation not to repeat the same career path. Although this was to impose their own ideas on others, they told their children that a stable and secure life was the best choice through their lifetime experience in the commercial battlefield. There were many occupations that

meet such requirements, among them, the profession of teacher was endowed with more social significance and was highly praised. It was not only a decent and stable career for individuals, but also an indispensable noble occupation for the whole society.

#### **5.4.2. The Important People or Experience**

Whilst a minority of participants reported having important people or experience influence their choice in the current workplace, all participants reported having such people or experience during school time and in their early career. Most respondents identified the senior colleagues and teachers as the most important people. Whilst their influence was reported across both formal and informal situations, it was clear that the people or experiences they encountered in school time or at work were particularly important. To sum up, there were three types of people who influenced these female academics' career path: (1) the teachers that they encountered in their school life, including teachers from primary school to graduate stage and even Doctoral stage supervisors, who inspired and guided them. Their academic rigor and enthusiasm for research inspired these interviewees. (2) Family members, their parents or close relatives, such as grandfather and aunt. And this kind of influence was from an early age; imperceptible, it was like planting seeds in their heart when they were children. (3) Their leaders or colleagues in work.

*Zhao* said that a male teacher in the same office who was more than ten years older than her influenced her most, and she thought he played a very important leading role in her career. *Qian* said it was her supervisor during her Master's degree in the UK. She recalled,

*'In fact, I should say that when I made a decision to study for a Doctorate, in my decision, he had a great influence on me, a subtle influence'.*

‘其实应该说我做出攻读博士学位这样一个决定，他在我的决定当中就是对我的影响是非常大的，是一种潜移默化的一种影响。’

She was also impressed by his profound knowledge, the professionalism, the passion for learning, and his seriousness and preciseness. *Jiang* also mentioned her Master's and Doctor's supervisors influenced her the most,

*'I have learned a lot from these two teachers. In fact, knowledge is the second... The most fundamental thing is to be a person and love and dedication to education. I think their words and deeds have a great influence on me'.*

‘在这两位老师的身上我还是学到了很多很多东西，其实知识其实是其次的...最根本的其实是做人以及对于教育的这样一个热爱和奉献。我觉得他们两个人就是他们的一种言传身教，其实还是给我很大的一个影响。’

*Li* mentioned an English teacher whom she had met during her undergraduate period. The teacher came back from studying in the United States. She was impressed by his way of treating every student equally no matter what the level of the student's English. She talked a lot about the significant people and experience that influenced her. Her experience of being a part-time teacher was very precious for her. Because she went from an inland city to Guangzhou to study and work, her students were adults who have a good foundation of English learning. The students' purpose was to communicate with foreigners at work. The students had high expectations of her, so she reflected and constantly improved her ability, and strived not to let everyone down.

*Zhou* mentioned that no one in her family had been engaged in the education industry, and her family's economic conditions were not good when she was a child. At that time, she had English classes in junior high school. She thought that English teachers had a great influence on her:

*'His way of education... because I have never learned English from primary school, a very fresh thing...sometimes he would ask me to answer the question, often praised me, and I would slowly like English. Maybe just because I like that teacher, I like that English. I think it may have some relationship'.*

‘他的教育方式...因为英语对我来说是因为从小学从来没接触过，非常新鲜的东西...有的时候会叫我（回答问题），会经常表扬我，我就慢慢可能就喜欢上英语这个东西。可能就是因为喜欢那个老师，就喜欢那个英语，我觉得可能有一定的关系。’

*Wang* talked about the teachers she met in the process of studying. She thought a teacher who taught pedagogical psychology in her undergraduate time had a great influence on her. His lectures were humorous and literary, and he often published some articles in newspapers, which made *Wang* feel he was a role model:

*'I felt like he is a magical social role or a person, I was thinking when my articles can also be published...I felt like these people were right beside me, and he taught me lessons, and I felt like the role models were around me... I feel very lucky and admirable'.*

‘那个时候你就会觉得好神奇的一种社会角色或者是一种人物，你就想什么时候你的东西也能够像人家一样还可以发表出来...然后你就觉得这些人他就在你身边，然后他给你上课，然后你就觉得也是榜样就在身边这样的感觉...更是觉得特别的幸运和心生敬佩。’

*Chen* mentioned a previous Dean of her department that influenced her,

*'He will often combine the current social situation with his teaching, and then teach. I think this point is still useful for my current teaching, and I will often reflect on it... He still has a great influence on me'.*

‘他会经常去考虑，把现在的社会现状跟他的教学去结合在一起，然后去教学，我觉得这点还是对我目前的教学，我也会经常去反思...他对我的影响还是挺大的。’

Parents were particularly important in relation to life value and interests, and their passions for education were also significant, with this influence continuing through the participants’

career choices. *Feng* was born in an educational family. Her grandfather and aunt were primary school teachers, so she may have had a deeper understanding of teachers. Like *Shen*, she wanted to be a teacher when she was young, because her father was a teacher:

*'He probably gave me a lot of good guidance in the early stages of my life...since childhood, right from the beginning, there should be an enlightenment teacher, must be my father...At that time, I had such a dream. I think the teacher's occupation is in my heart'.*

‘他可能在我人生最初的阶段给了很多比较好的这种引导...从小，从一开始对吧，应该是有一个启蒙老师，一定是我爸爸...那个时候就有这样的一个梦想，我觉得老师这个职业还是对我来说是我心有所属。’

Additionally, the positive learning environment was perceived as reinforcing the interests in the career, mostly through the engaging in the outstanding teaching and training environment with outstanding researchers around. *Chu* had a one-year further study in Peking Normal University; she believed this experience had a greater impact on her. Because she lived in a fixed environment and worked for a long time, she could not feel her self-improvement. During her year of study in Beijing, she met many Doctoral students of the same major in the university and communicated with them:

*'I met those doctors and studying together, and then in the whole atmosphere of Peking Normal University, including the city of Beijing, what I saw and felt, I felt that it had a great impact on me. I suddenly felt that I really stood higher and looked farther'.*

‘我遇见了一些博士一起学习，然后在北京师范大学的整个氛围中，包括北京，我所看到和感受到的，我觉得它对我有很大的影响。我突然觉得自己真的站得更高了，看得更远了。’

### 5.4.3. ‘Bonded’ to the Job

What 15 interviewees had in common was that they entered the education industry directly after graduation (the one exception was *Feng*). Some people entered the middle school or college to teach first, and finally came to the university through the promotion of academic qualifications or job transfer. When asked whether they had ever thought of engaging in other professions before engaging in the education industry, only a few answered that they wanted to engage in another occupation. For example, *Chu* wanted to be a tour guide because she had a tour guide certificate and she liked to travel. Some wanted to work as an editor in a publishing house or engage in scientific research in education companies or research institutions. One ambitious teacher had wanted to start a business in the past: ‘*I want to start a business. I want to be a female boss*’ (‘我想创业，我想做女老板’) said *Yang*.

*Feng* was the only one who had previous job experience as a journalist for a short time. She majored in geography from undergraduate to graduate stage and worked as a journalist for a year before she went for PhD study. When she graduated from the Master's degree, she thought if she could find a suitable job, she would not want to study for a PhD. But after four months' work in the newspaper office, because of the rectification of the news agency, the site did not meet their requirements and was closed. After this, she had a clearer career plan for future work, which also affected her later choice of being a teacher in higher education.

Likewise, *Jiang* once had an opportunity to start a business of her own. She worked with her friends to set up an educational consulting company. But the university teacher's work required a lot of time and energy, so it was difficult to balance the relationship between teaching and the business, and she finally quit the company. *Jiang* said,

*‘I started a company to do educational consultation with friends...for about three years, I had three partners, and eventually I quit...I think there was a conflict of time and energy...it's a contradiction between time and energy’.*

‘我有跟朋友一起来做一个教育咨询的一个公司...大概是接近三年的这样一个时间，最终我还是退出了...我个人的感觉上也是会存在一个冲突，就是时间和精力上的一个冲突。’

As for considering other occupations, other teachers said that they did not want to engage in other professions, or even if they did, they did not know what they could do besides education or teaching. For example, *Wu* said,

*‘...to be honest, I really don't think I can do anything else’.*

‘说实话我还真不觉得我能够干其他的。’

and *Zhou* had the same view:

*‘I think I don't know what I can do except to be a teacher. I haven't thought about it’.*

‘我觉得除了当老师以外，我不知道自己能干什么，没想过。’

While they were very familiar with this environment and felt comfortable in the university context, they were not confident to enter other industries or only imagined adapting to other environments. As *Sun* expressed in her opinion,

*‘I am already familiar with the environment...if I go to the company, I think that the environment is mutual suspicion and deception, it seems inappropriate, because I have been in higher education, I feel that maybe HE teachers are simpler. What they thought was always about students, and then academic matters, maybe in terms of interpersonal relationships, it was simpler’.*

‘我已经熟悉这个环境...如果去公司的话，我觉得那种就是尔虞我诈的环境好像不太适合，因为我一直是在高校待着，我感觉可能其实高校老师更单纯一些。他想的一直是学生的事情，然后包括学术的事情，可能人际关系方面还是更单纯一点的。’

Apart from the above reasons, external factors, such as regional differences in development, were also frequently mentioned. For example, some interviewees were in less developed

cities, and they would compare the cost of living in the first-tier developed cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, according to their consumption level and their own wage level. If they went to the highly developed cities and found a job of the same type, their income would not match the same level of life, and the increase in the cost of living would make their life quality decline. Thus, combining these internal and external factors, even if they had the idea to change the status quo, they would rather choose to give up the change after weighing the advantages and disadvantages.

### **5.5. RQ3: How Do the Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education Describe Their Current Career Aspirations?**

The third research question concentrated on the aspiration of the female academics in the Chinese higher education background. It mainly focuses on the evaluation of their own career planning, division of career stages and the ambition of future promotion. This is an important section about promotion intention of the mid-career academic women in higher education. In this section, their answers are presented in regard to the following four aspects. The first one is evaluating the clarity of the mid-career academic women's career plans, which includes the survey result and interviewees' understanding. The second aspect is the interviewees' plan in the near future. The third part focuses on the opinion of the division of career stages. The last part outlines their own career intention and ambition, and also their observations of other female colleagues around them.

#### **5.5.1. Self-evaluation of Career Planning**

The first question that was asked about career planning in the interviews was: Do you think you have a clear career plan? The answers divided into three categories: clear, unclear, and between the two, showing an ambiguous attitude. Table 5.7. identifies the people that gave different answers:

**Table 5.7. The Interviewees' Attitudes Towards Career Planning**

Opinions on career planning	Interviewees
Clear	<i>Wang / Feng / Chen / Jiang / Shen / Han</i>
Unclear	<i>Qian / Li / Zhou / Yang</i>
Ambiguous attitude	<i>Sun / Wu / Zheng / Chu</i>
Other	<i>Zhao / Wei</i>

As shown in Table 5.7., the 'other' option indicated that two did not answer this question; this was due to the initial stage of interviewing not taking this question into consideration. *Wei* expressed that she had worked in the current university for 21 years as an administrative staff; she did not have much comment on her career plan for the time being. Six of the interviewees reported that they were clear about their career plan. *Wang* and *Chen* said they have a clear career plan for the future. *Shen* said she was 'very clear' about her career plan. *Feng* thought she was 'quite clear' at present for preparing for the assessment of professional title. *Shen* said that she was 'very clear' about her career plan now, but she had not been very clear about her career when she just started this career. *Jiang* expressed that she personally thought that her plan for the work and life was relatively clear. *Han* reckoned that she belonged to those kinds of people who always have clear planning.

Four of the interviewees articulated that they were not clear about the career planning. *Qian* said, '*In fact, I was not particularly clear at the beginning*'. But she did mention that it was better afterwards. *Li* reckoned that she did not have a clear plan, '*It's not clear. I'm just going step by step*'. *Zhou* talked about her career planning in the very beginning and indicated that '*It's really not clear*'. *Yang* also said her career plan was not clear.

However, *Sun*, *Wu*, *Zheng* and *Chu* did not answer this question directly. Instead, they turned to other topics. For example, *Sun* turned to talk about her own short-term goals.

*'As far as I'm concerned, I don't have any long-term goals. But the short-term goal is... I want to transfer to a Lecturer. After that, I will continue to go for the professional title. This is the way'.*

我目前来讲的话，我现在没有很长远的目标。但就是短期目标就是我要转教师，转教师之后，然后紧紧接着评职称，就是一个这样的路了。’

*Wu* did not have any clear plan from her school age to work; she always followed the arrangement of her parents. When *Zheng* was asked, ‘do you have a clear career plan for your future?’ she replied that because her two children were still very young, she might have to wait for a year or two before she made further plans. *Chu* shared her recent plan was to apply for a Doctor's degree. A possible reason for their changing the topic or giving an irrelevant answer was because they were cautious about the uncertain future or because they lacked confidence in their own plans.

Generally speaking, people still had certain plans for their future, but relatively few people were extremely confident in their plans, and few participants had no plans. As was shown in the analysis in survey question 12 (see section 5.2.1.), 40.41% of the respondents chose ‘somewhat clear’, which was a neutral option, and 24.3% chose ‘not so clear’ and only three people responded they were not clear at all. In the face-to-face interviews, the participants tended to show a modest attitude, not too confident about their plans. In regard to people with unclear attitudes or diverting the topic, this might indicate their uncertainty about their plans and avoiding setting clear goals.

### **5.5.2. Career Plans**

There were two categories of answer from the mid-career academic women in higher education. One was seeking promotion, which meant the evaluation of professional titles or the advancement of their current position. The other one was their plan for further education,

such as continuing to study for a degree or study abroad. Although this was an academic plan, it is still closely related with promotion. In addition to the work plan, most of them had plans to balance family and work better. But some said that everything was up to fate, and they chose to follow the destiny.

The interviewees usually combined their future plans with a recent promotion plan with a time limit. For example, '*I hope to be promoted to a Professor in three years' time*', said *Qian*, who had been an Associate Professor for many years and achieved her Doctorate degree in 2019. *Sun* expected that it was fine for her to be promoted to be an Associate Professor by the age of 40, because she had been working as a Counsellor for five years and nearly finished her PhD and would be a Lecturer soon. *Wang* had a very detailed plan for her promotion in the next year because she had just failed the evaluation of Professor this year. As mentioned in the previous RQ1, in order to get an Associate Professor title within the 'golden two years', *Feng* said she would strive to achieve the goal:

*'I am still clear, and I want to confer the Associate Professor title, because two years will soon be over. This is a goal that I want to achieve and strive to achieve'.*

‘我目前还是清晰的要评副教授，因为两年时间很快就过去了，这个是我目前比较清晰的，想要自己一定要实现的一个目标，在努力实现的一个目标。’

More mature interviewees (from 45 years old and over) tended to live a comfortable life and be content with the status quo, so they did not have more positive plans for the future. Some of the representatives in the late stage of their career did not seem very ambitious about the future planning. For instance, *Li* was an Associate Professor and near to retirement; she had had no idea about career planning in her early days. She gradually understood it and became more and more clear in her work. When she was asked whether she wanted to be promoted to a Professor, she replied,

*'Of course, ... But if there is more and more pressure, I only have such limited energy and time, I will assess whether I'm worth investing in these things. Because it's not a matter of paying or not paying to do research now'.*

‘那当然想...但是如果是压力越来越大，我只有那么多精力，那么多时间，我会衡量一下我值不值得投入这些东西。因为现在做科研不是付出不付出的问题...’

As mentioned before, she had no idea about career planning in her early days. She gradually understood it and became more and more clear in her work. *Li* said she had considered about promotion, but she still gave priorities to her family and her hobbies.

Similarly, *Zhou* was near the end of her career; she felt comfortable with her current position and did not want to compete for the advancement. She said,

*'I don't think I've had that much momentum since I was a Professor... in 2012, in order to be a Professor, I was really struggling at that time. In addition to articles, I got provincial quality courses, two provincial quality courses, and teaching materials, provincial social science awards. All the things I can think of in all aspects of my research project are really hard work. I was tired at that time'.*

‘我感觉自我感觉从评上教授以后，冲劲就不是那么大。对，你看我在 2012 年的时候，当时为了评正教授，我那时候真的是很拼，除了文章，然后我自己弄了省级精品课，两门省级精品课，然后教材，省社科奖。所有东西我能想到的我科研项目各个方面，真的是很拼，那时候累的。’

*Yang* was younger than the two mentioned above, nearly forty years old, but she had a negative attitude toward career planning.

*'In fact, career planning, to be honest, I hope to make a little progress, from the utilitarian point, that is to say, to be promoted as Deputy Division Chief position. But I'm just looking forward to it, but I don't have any specific steps to take. I just rely on chance or fate. I just do my job well in my own position. As I said just now, I do my job*

*well, so I can accept the status quo when I retire. If the leader feels that I can continue to be promoted and appointed, I will continue to work'.*

‘其实职业规划大概说实话肯定希望在能在自己再进步一点，比如说所有的进步一点，功利一点，就是说能提个副处岗位，但是这个我是我只是期待，但是我没有具体的操作步骤，完全靠机会，或者说完全靠命运交给命运，我把我自己岗位上的工作做好就行，就像刚才说的，把我本职工作做好，就这样退休我都能接受这个现状，如果能领导觉得我可以还能再继续提拔任用一下，我也会继续工作。’

Personality and habits could also lead to different plans for the future. Combined with the previous conversation with *Wu*, who was not good at planning and did not have a lot of self-confidence. She always followed her parents' choices in some key points in her life. When asked about her work plan for the future, she expressed that she struggled in the contradictory. She wanted to prove that she has a certain level of academic competence and teaching skills, but she could not write good articles to publish. She was frustrated with the fact that she had not achieved her goals and had no confidence in setting goals.

*‘...I still have a request for this job, so it's a bit contradictory. I think within my competence, I want to improve the effect and level of my teaching. I enjoy it, but I can't always make the outside world recognise me, that is, I can't write articles to publish, I don't necessarily do it’.* (*Wu*)

‘...我对这个工作还是有要求，所以说有点矛盾。我想到是在我的能力范围之内，我想把我的教学课堂教学的效果提高，水平提高，我自己去 enjoy it，但是我不一定能够能够做到让外界来承认我的程度，就是不能够写成文章来发表出来，就不一定做得到。’

Besides, she was not under a great pressure in terms of conferring the professional titles, because the course that she was teaching did not attract too much attention from the university level. One more personal factor was that, as a Master's degree holder, she felt that she was not competitive in terms of academic skills among her colleagues.

### 5.5.3. Career Stages

Participants varied in the extent to which they reported their division of the career stages. There were three types of answer regarding the division. The first type of respondent gave a clear stage division according to her knowledge or experience. The second type was that they had not considered it before and even if being asked this question, they did not have the intention to review. The respondents in the third type did not answer this question but diverted to some other topics, which may indicate their uncertainty of their future. However, even if the answer was given, it was difficult to summarise a clear pattern.

Most of the interviewees would review and describe the career stage in their understanding. Their divisions were based on the job position or professional title, or the challenges in each stage. For example, *Sun* had worked for nine years, and thought that she was still in the initial stage of exploration, because she was studying for a PhD degree and could only be transferred to a Lecturer after graduation. Therefore, she concluded that she had been a Counsellor from the beginning of her work till now, which was the initial stage of her career.

*'I think I'm still in the early stage. In fact, I'm in the exploratory stage. I worked as a Counsellor for four years, and then I went to study for a Doctor's degree'.*

‘我觉得我目前的话还处于初期，其实是摸索阶段，我做辅导员四年，然后去考博。’

Likewise, *Li* was an Associate Professor, and she thought that the experience of teaching public foreign languages in the early four years was the initial stage, and the second stage was to teach communicative English, and then there was a qualitative leap after finishing the Doctoral degree. But she did not express a clear division of career, saying that it was just that each stage had different challenges. *Li* said,

*'In fact, it can't be so clearly divided, just different challenges in each stage'.*

‘实际上也不能那么清楚的划分，只是每一个阶段不同的挑战。’

*Zhou* was a Professor and close to the end of her career; she divided the career stages according to her professional titles, stating:

*‘I think it should be a part before the Associate Professor. It’s an early stage. Then, after I became an Associate Professor, it may be the intermediate stage, that is, the stage that has already made a sprint’.*

‘我就是说划分的初期，然后在副教授以后可能就是中级阶段，就是已经往上冲刺的一个阶段了。’

*Wang* was an Associate Professor. She believed that she had a better understanding of education or teachers and she knew the division of novice teachers and mature teachers. She said,

*‘Then if I divide my career, I think that I may be a novice teacher in the first three years, and a novice teacher in the university. After about three years, I felt that I was gradually growing into a mature and a backbone teacher’.*

‘如果划分阶段…我也会觉得我可能前三年，算是新手教师，高校里的新手教师。

然后大概三年之后你会觉得你慢慢在成长为一种成熟型还有骨干型的教师。’

Several interviewees linked their career stages to their promotion and set the promotion as a short-term goal in their current work environment. Some replied that the time point of the first promotion after entry to the university was the end of the initial stage. For instance, *Feng* only entered the university to work for three months. She commented,

*‘In terms of the division of stages ... it’s the initial stage. Now I’m in the initial stage, I should be in the initial stage...I think it’s over when I become an Associate Professor. I think the mid-term may be a relatively long process. It may take seven, eight years or something. In the next five years, it’s five years after two years. In the next seven years, it will probably be my Associate Professor period’.*

‘划分阶段的话...刚开始是初期，我目前现在是初期的阶段，应该是还是初期的阶段初期...等我觉得有我定了副教授应该出去就结束了，我感觉中期可能就是一个比较长的过程了，可能要 7、8 年或者是什么，再往后 5 年，就是两年以后的 5 年，就七年以后可能因为副教授。’

Other interviewees believed that the initial stage would be relatively long, which was mainly spent on familiarising themselves with the post and preparing for the future career development. For example, *Jiang*, considered that the first seven to ten years were the initial stage, and:

*‘Ten to 20 years may be a mid-term, and the following stage is the development and inheritance stage’.*

‘十年到 20 年可能是一个中期，然后后面算是一个发展和继承的阶段了。’

*Chen* was working while studying for her PhD degree and she thought that her initial career stage would be five or six years. She reported,

*‘Before 2015, I was a Counsellor, and then I was studying for a Doctoral degree from 2015 to 2018. From ‘I start teaching this year’, to ‘I can teach these courses well’, it may take two to three years. I think it may take at least five to six years. I may find my own position in my major’.*

‘就在 2015 年之前我在做就是辅导员，然后 2015 到 2018 年在读博。我就今年开始，我觉得一般可能得需要至少 2 到 3 年的时间，从你开始代课，到把你所上的这几门课能够上好。我觉得可能至少得 5 到 6 年的时间，你可能就是一个在专业里面去找到自己的一个定位。’

*Shen* had worked in her current university for 20 years. She reported that she thought it took two or three years to find a clear career goal at the beginning. The initial stage would be the next five to ten years after setting the goal. She said,

*'It will take about two years for the initial confusion, and then find a clear goal. If I can start a little bit on this goal, I think it will take me about three years. Well, the development in this process, for university teachers, I think there is such a saying that 'Ten years' cold bench' [which means an indifferent post]. It's five to ten years, you may be able to get a better development by accumulating in five to ten years'.*

‘初期的迷茫，大概要两年左右的时间，然后再寻找到一个清晰的目标，并且能够在这个目标上面有一点点起步的话，可能需要我认为，个人认为需要三年左右的时间。那么在这个过程中的发展，对于大学老师来说，我想十年冷板凳是有这样的一个说法的，5 到 10 年，你用 5 年的时间去积累，可能能够获得一个比较好的发展。’

The second type of interviewees were near unanimous in declaring the uncertainty of their future and an unwillingness to set long-term goals. When the researcher asked this question and encouraged them to recall the past, they did not have the intention to recollect. For example, *Wei* was an administrative staff and she had worked in higher education for 21 years. She looked forward to her future career, but she did not have a specific division of career stages.

*'No, I don't think about it, it's just a matter of personal efforts, being in management posts, because there are many opportunities and coincidences, and there are other things I don't care about, maybe others care about, so I've never forced myself to do anything'.*

‘没有，因为我觉得这个东西除了个人努力，做管理岗嘛，因为还有很多机缘巧合，另外一个还有一些其他的东西我不在意也许别人在意，我所以我这块我从来没有强求我自己该干嘛。’

Like *Han*, she had worked for seven years on the students' affair, and she replied that she did not pay attention to the career stages. Similarly, *Yang* had worked in the university for ten years and taught the professional development courses to the undergraduate students, so

she ought to be familiar with the career development theory, but she said that she had never applied it to herself. She gave a very appropriate description of herself:

*'No, I can teach others very clearly, but I don't understand it myself, I put myself wholeheartedly in the complicated affairs. It's just like pulling a rickshaw without looking up at the road'.*

‘没有，我给别人讲的可明白，我给自己就一点都不明白，就完全把自己全身心地搁在繁杂的用大的那种事务里去了，就完全属于那种只低头拉车不抬头看路那种。’

The third type of interviewees gave irrelevant answers. For example, *Wu* gave a very vague answer that she could divide the stage according to the topics she talked about, such as the stage of study, before and after giving birth to her child. As discussed previously, she followed the choices made by her parents and generally had no plan for her career. This answer may indicate her uncertainty of her future and an unwillingness to set long-term goals.

Similarly, *Zheng* had worked in her current university for seven years and thought that her professional ignorance period had long passed, but she did not give a clear answer. Instead, she gave a linear narrative without a timeline. She said,

*'I would like to start with a muddled exploration period. Although I still wanted to be a teacher in the beginning, I did not have a deep understanding of that. When I first started, I began to understand it slowly, and then I entered a stage of running-in and understanding it. After the understanding stage of running-in, I feel that I have entered such a mature stage of a clear positioning, and then I think it should be a mature stage, I think there will be a development...I don't think there is any obvious difference. It's a slow feeling of a process. There is nothing particularly obvious'.*

‘我想最开始是一个懵懵懂懂的探索期，虽然开始的时候还是也很想从事教师这个职业，但是对他还不是特别的深刻的理解，刚开始来的时候，然后慢慢的就比较理解了，然后就进入了一个我觉得最开始的一个磨合和了解阶段。磨合了解阶

段过了以后,然后就觉得进入了一个很清楚的一个定位的这样一个比较成熟的阶段,然后最后我觉得应该是一个成熟了以后,我觉得才有一个发展...我觉得没有什么特别明显的不同,都是一种过程的一个慢慢的感受。没有什么特别明显的一个发生。,

The same reply came from *Chu*. She had worked in higher education for six years and her answer was that her career plan was influenced by her sister, but she did not specify her career planning or explicit stages. Despite being highly uncertain of the future, the majority of interviewees reported everything would go well, or at least, they had made some progress.

In addition, there was no necessary correlation between the working years and whether the interviewees had a clear career plan. Among them, *Zhao*, *Li*, *Zhou*, *Wu*, *Wei* and *Shen* had been engaged in higher education for at least 20 years. The interview results showed that they did not have a deeper understanding of the career stages than others. *Wu* was typical. She had mentioned that her career plan was very unclear, and she had no specific opinions of her occupation, which was chosen by her parents. *Li*, *Zhou* and *Shen* recalled their memories, and gave a division according to their own experiences. *Wei* said she did not force herself to do anything at all. Therefore, it could be inferred that there is no clear correlation between the number of years working and having a clear career plan, but what might be important is whether the person has a strong ability of planning.

Similarly, in the survey (see section 5.2.), the SPSS analysis result of Question 12 was very similar to the results of the interview: there was not necessarily a correlation between how long they had worked in higher education and whether their career planning was clear. The majority of respondents chose 'somewhat clear', which was a neutral option. On the five-options scale, the choices focused on the three options in the middle, and the number of people who chose the extreme value at either end was small. This reinforced the result that

there was no necessary correlation between the clarity of self-career planning and the time working.

#### **5.5.4. Other Females' Career Aspiration**

The observation of female colleagues around the interviewees provided a comparatively objective group portrait for the mid-career academic women in higher education. While some interviewees recognised many female colleagues actively strove for the promotion, they also implied that some would go with the flow. Some interviewees implied that this mainly depended on one's personality and characteristics, as well as individual family income status and living conditions. For example, from the observation of *Feng*, she felt if someone came from a wealthy family background, she might not be eager to pursue the promotion:

*'...maybe their family status is better, their husband's work or salary will be better, so she can work without so much effort. I think it has something to do with both personal and family. I can't generalise it'.*

‘可能比如他们家庭状况比较好一点，老公的工作或者待遇收入会更好一点，她就可以不用那么拼命的努力的去工作。个人的，还有家庭都我觉得都有关系，不能一概而论。’

In the same way, *Jiang* had a similar observation on the individual family income status. She said,

*'There are women who are actively striving for it, and then there are women who are comfortable with the situation... In fact, this may have something to do with the economic situation and the whole (economic) level of her family. Some may have something to do with her own position. Some may think that what I need is a decent identity of a college teacher'.*



She used '*the vast majority of teachers*' three times to emphasise there were still a lot of people pursuing self-improvement and the promotion.

Likewise, Wang had worked in the higher education for ten years. She observed a similar situation and thought that most of her female colleagues' attitude was more casual because the promotion requirements were getting higher and higher, which were beyond many teachers' limits. Wang observed,

*'Follow the fate, or resist, most of my colleagues are less active than others. Occasionally, one or two of them are positive, which is related to personal characteristics. For example, some of our colleagues are a bit older, they are almost 50 years old. In addition, the school's requirement for the professional titles is getting higher and higher, they feel like even they will try harder, that kind of requirement is (too hard) ...'.*

‘还是随缘，还是抗拒，我周围的同事大部分是比是不怎么积极的，偶尔也有那么一两个是积极的，跟个人的特点有关。比如说我们有些同事他年龄也大一点了，比如说他快 50 岁了，加上学校的评职称的要求是高越来越高，他就觉得他好像再努力，那种要求他...’

A person's publications were regarded as an essential standard of the evaluation of academic ability and professional title. Wang noticed the pressure from publication as well, noting,

*'For example, they ask for eight core Chinese articles, eight articles, it's not three. Eight articles are not easy to be published, so they (female teachers) don't want them'.*

‘比如说我们是要求发八篇中文核心，八篇，他不是说篇三篇这样的，他就觉得这八篇也不是好容易发出来的，所以他就不想要。’

This requirement in the promotion system frequently worked against women's social responsibility. Some women who were under such pressure might choose to stay at their position for years. As observed by *Li*, an Associate Professor who had worked for 22 years:

*'...but many of our colleagues choose not to confer their titles, because they do not agree with these, they do not agree with the evaluation system. Because many people don't think that Professors can teach better than the Lecturers. Many people do. It's true that we have to give sessions and take care of our families. Many young teachers have no energy to do it. Then they come across the unreasonable rules of publishing, which are despised by everyone'.*

‘…但是我们好多同事他们选择不去评职称，因为他们不认同这些，不认同评价体系。因为好多人都觉得教授不见得会比我讲师讲课讲得好，很多人都是这样。确实也是又要上课，又要顾家，很多年轻老师是没精力去做的，然后又碰上出版，发表的种不合理的规矩，大家就瞧不起这一块。

According to the interviewees' observation, women's pursuit of administrative titles may not be particularly positive. A possible reason was that the administrative affairs tend to be sophisticated and time-consuming, which was unfriendly to females with multiple roles. *Sun* was studying for a Doctorate degree and planned to transfer to a Lecturer position; she observed that at each stage, most women paid more attention to their family and their children. Between the dilemma of work and childcare, they always put family and childcare before work. With the promotion, the administrative affairs will certainly increase. Therefore, in *Sun*'s observation, some Professors refused the offer of being a Dean because it took up too much time.

However, the pursuit of professional titles was welcome by the majority of female teachers, because it was a proof of someone's academic ability. As *Li* said,

*'We are sure that everyone would like to hold the academic title. But it is because that, the title seems to be a kind of recognition of ourselves, who wouldn't? All willing'.*

‘(评)职称肯定大家都愿意,但是职称因为,好像对自己的一种认可,谁不愿意呢?都愿意。’

*Chen* had a similar point of view that the professional title equates to a professional recognition. She explained,

*‘As for being a leader role, they don’t want to. For example, like Professor and Associate Professor title, everyone is still very active and willing to fight, because it’s a professional recognition. I think everyone is still working hard, and then they have to confer the professional title. But in the evaluation of this administrative position, I think women, and the girls around me, are not very willing to do this’.*

‘至于当官这种,能不能当领导的,但比如说像评教授副教授,大家还都是很积极的,都很愿意去拼,因为这是一种专业上的认可,我觉得大家还都是很努力的,然后要去评这种专业的职称。但是在这种行政职位的这种评定上面,我觉得女性,而且我周围的女生好像都不是很愿意去做这些。’

Another interviewee reported if the promotion related to one’s own interests, then they would actively strive for it. *Zhou* suggested,

*‘If they are concerned about their salary, I think they want. At least you have to confer your professional title! When there were not so many strong demands for research, and when think about the so-called seniority, there might still be aspirations...’*

‘假如关切到他们的工资这方面的话,我觉得是都想要,最起码职称得评上。原来没那么多对科研那么强的要求的时候,原来所谓的论资排辈的时候,可能还有愿望。’

Encountering the questions related with one’s ambition, the interviewees hesitated to respond. After all, it was hard for them to talk about their career ambition in front of a stranger. Interestingly, when asked about specific plans, their plans all related to self-improvement or further education. In other words, they had ambitious plans, or at least were

prepared for the possible opportunities for the uncertain future, especially those who did not answer these questions straightforwardly but talked about plans instead. Whether they did not like promotion, or they did not like the requirements and efforts needed to go along with the promotion, this is worthy of thinking and further exploration.

From the above descriptions, standing in the perspective of an observer, the interviewees gave comparatively objective answers to describing mid-career academic female teachers' aspiration and promotion intention. On the one hand, the recognition of one's academic ability was the main reason why they generally pursued the promotion to professional titles. With the advancing of professional title, the level of salary and treatment would increase, which also brought extra benefits to their work. Thus, there was an opinion that women with a wealthy family background and better living environment might not be very active in pursuing economic interest. Another important factor was one's personality or characteristics. The interviewees generally believed that those who were '*expressive*', '*like to be a leader*', '*like to show themselves*' would have a stronger desire for promotion. Therefore, based on these factors, the motivation of female academics in promotion was rather varied.

## **5.6. RQ4: What Are the Perceived Barriers and Challenges to Senior Leadership Experienced by Mid-career Academic Women?**

From the answers to the previous question about the career aspirations of the female teachers that are working in Chinese higher education, it can be seen that no matter whether they have a clear plan for their career or not, most of the participants were aiming to be promoted to a higher position. Therefore, this question aims to explore the barriers and challenges that these women may encounter in their pursuit of promotion. The answers to this question will be treated in two main parts. The first part focuses on the perceived barriers and challenges from these females' working environment, which includes section 5.6.1. (uneven gender

ratio in leadership), section 5.6.2. (the promotion criteria), and section 5.6.3. (publishing). It provides a general overview of the perceived barriers and challenges of the mid-career academic women in higher education in regard to the current working environment. This is followed by discussion on the promotion requirements of the administrative staff and academic staff, respectively. Then the participants' views on the publications and the environment of academic publishing in Chinese higher education are presented. The second main part is dealt with in section 5.6.4., which focuses on the work-life balance of the mid-career academic women.

### **5.6.1. Uneven Gender Ratio in Leadership**

In their current working environment, the interviewees generally agreed on two views concerning gender and promotion. First, the current gender composition of the leadership in the respondents' universities were, undoubtedly, more males than females in leadership level, and the higher the level, the lower the proportion of females. Second, a common view amongst interviewees was that with the increase of working years, men's advantage in leadership was strengthened in an obvious manner.

As *Zhou* said, in the school of foreign languages, although the majority of employees are female, '*more leaders are men*'. Similarly, *Wang* reported that in her (education) department, which is middle level, '*we have six leaders, four men, two women*'. ('我们有六个领导，四个是男的，两个是女的。'). In her more than ten years of work, *Jiang* also stated,

*'...the number of female leaders is always maintained at one, among the twelve or thirteen university level leaders'.*

‘...女性校领导的个数应该始终维持在一个，也就是你在十二三个（校领导）的这样一个规模里面。’

At the university level leadership, *Shen* gave a similar answer:

*‘...the male-to-female ratio of Vice Principals must be men outnumbered women, for example, there are two women among 11 school leaders, and the others are all men’.*

‘就是学校的校长层面，校长副校长男女比例一定是男性多一些，比如说在 11 位校领导当中有两位女性，其他都是男性。’

*Han* also notified that in her department, the ratio of male leaders to female leaders was 3:2, and at the university level, the ratio was 8:2.

A variety of perspectives were expressed that with the time increasing, as they move up the ladder, the advantage of men was more obvious and there were fewer and fewer women in leadership groups. For example, *Wang* pointed out,

*‘Middle and high-level leadership, I think it’s still dominated by men, and the higher the level, the more males it seems...so it should be said that fewer and fewer women (in leadership positions), when we are going up’.*

‘中高层，我觉得还是以男的为主，而且越到高层好像越以男的为主...所以应该说越往上走，女性越来越少。’

*Shen* shared the same point of view:

*‘I feel generally good, but the higher up the ladder, the more likely women will be slightly lower than men in the overall proportion, yes, it is’.*

‘我总体感觉还好，但是越往上层去，可能女性在总体比例上会略低于男性，会的，会有这种情况。’

Likewise, *Feng* answered,

*‘As time goes on, the more men win...the longer we stay, the more we do in the family’.*

‘随着时间的增强了，时间变长的话，男性的话就会越胜出...现在我们还是越时间长越家庭。

To be specific, some interviewees believed that men have more advantages in leadership. As *Chen* put it, '*I think men may have an absolute advantage*'. (我觉得男性可能有绝对的优势)

*Zheng*, who worked in a foreign language school, gave the same reply:

*'I still think that men will have some advantages, especially in our major; the number of boys is relatively small, and once their work is as good as ours (girls'), people may focus on them (boys)'*

‘肯定还是觉得男性会有优势一些，我觉得因为特别是在我们专业里面，男生的数量相对较少，然后一旦他们的工作就算做的我们一样好的话，可能侧重点都会偏向他们。

Three possible reasons for the absolute advantages of men's leadership emerged from the exploration of the interviews. First, men spend more time on work while women pay more attention on family issues. As *Feng* elaborated,

*'Maybe at first, the gap between women and men is not big, but with the growth of age... women will focus more on the family...they will spend more time in serving families, and less scientific research results, which is weaker than men, so men are more likely to win'*

‘可能起初的话我们女性的和男性的差距不大，但随着年龄的增长...女性会更侧重于家庭，可能时间长了以后，分散更多的时间在为大家服务，然后做出更多的科研成果这个方面就弱于男性了，所以男性就更容易胜出了。’

Other interviewees had slightly different views on the dominance position in the leadership of men. *Han* thought that the lack of women in the leadership group, especially top leadership, was due to women's self-choice. She explained that this choice originated from the idea that women wanted to pay more for their families:

*'I think the reason is the self-choice of female teachers... as a woman, she has a family, she has children, especially children, and then her personal choice is (family)...when she personally encounters such career choices, she may prefer to choose not to compete for higher-level leadership positions. Because leadership does not represent more power, but more responsibilities, more obligations and more pressure. So many women prefer to take on less pressure at work because they need to devote their energy to educating their children and caring for their families...I think women's subjective career aspiration is not as strong as men's...She would like to compete for a middle-level leadership position, but she would have to consider more when competing for a higher-level leadership position or something'.*

‘我觉得原因是女老师的自我选择问题...作为一个女的，她有家庭，她有孩子，特别是有孩子，然后她势必他个人选择是（家庭）...所以她个人在遇到这样的职业选择的时候，她可能会偏向于选择我不去竞争更高级别的领导职务。因为做领导不代表的是更多的权利，其实是更多的责任，更多的义务和更多的压力。所以很多的女性在这件事情上面，她偏向于选择在工作上承担相对少一些的压力，因为她需要分出精力去教育孩子和照顾家庭...我觉得是女性主观在自己的职务晋升上面没有男性那么大那么强烈的事业心...女性会在这些事业和家庭选择上，倾向于事业上少一点，她愿意去竞争一个中层干部岗位，但是要去竞争更高级别的领导岗位什么的，她就会要考虑了。

Second, because most leaders are male, it is more convenient to communicate with each other. As *Chen* said,

*'...because most of them are male leaders now, it's more convenient to communicate with each other. There may be many obstacles and problems in communication with women'.*

‘因为现在大部分都是男性领导，然后沟通起来比较方便，然后跟女性可能沟通起来会有很多的这样的一些障碍和问题。’

Zheng shared the same view:

*'(A leader should) also have a good ability to coordinate the relationship between teachers and students in all aspects, and between all aspects of leadership'.*

‘（好的领导）还要有一个很好的能够协调各方面老师之间师生和领导各方面之间的一个关系的能力。’

Third, in order to be a leader, a woman should be exceptionally outstanding. As Chen asserted:

*'Unless it is true that a woman is very good, she is much better than men, and she may be much better in all respects, so people will consider her (to be a leader)'.*

‘然后除非确实女性很优秀，她比男性要优秀很多，她可能确实在这方面然后要优秀很多，觉得更得去考虑。’

Wei also mentioned that a good female leader needs to take care of both her work and family:

*'We must take good care of the family, that is, you are a good comrade only when the family and work are all well managed, a good female comrade. This unconscious characteristic has already asked us to do so'.*

‘必须得把家庭也得照顾好，就是家庭和工作两不误才是好同志，好女同志。这个不自觉的角色，就已经要求自己这样了。’

To be a successful female leader, the energy she spends on balancing the relationship between family and work must be enormous. As Yang put it, the promotion of a female was a recognition of her past, but the promotion of a man was to attach more expectations to his future.

*'When promoting women, the emphasis is on their ability... Generally speaking, when promoting men, I think maybe people pay more attention to the future development... Women, I promoted her because I recognised her past. To promote a male, I attach more importance to his future. Right, I want to reward this woman, because I think she takes everything seriously, she is very hard-working, I should give*

*her a position to compensate, or affirm her previous achievements... If this man is very good and will make great progress in the future, I must promote him. He will surely have a great future. This man is a talented person, and I will give him opportunities step by step. It's my feeling that people generally value male's future'.*

‘提拔女性的时候看重的是能力...一般男性的时候，我觉得可能更看重还有没有发展前途吧...这个女性，我之所以提拔她，是因为我认可她的过去。提拔男同志，我更看重他的将来。对，我想犒劳这个女同志，我觉得她很认真，她很辛苦，应该给她一个职位去补偿，或者说肯定她之前输出的成绩...如果说这个男的很不错，将来大有发展，我一定要提拔他，他将来肯定前途无量，这个男的是一个人才，我才会一步步给他机会，男同志一般都会看未来式，是这是我的一种感受。’

Her explanation may imply that women's fates were bound to her family, and her past achievements could not promise she would have a brilliant future. On the contrary, men would be more appreciated and given more responsibilities and expectations when they show their abilities and talents at work.

This seems frustrating for a young female teacher when she witnessed a very talented female predecessor stay in the same position for years due to family reasons. *Chu* shared a story of her female colleague on the changes after her marriage.

*‘...a colleague of mine...I felt like she had done a lot of work and can shoulder half the sky in our department. Our psychological laboratory was built all by herself. She was particularly competent. Later, after having a baby, she was completely silent, and for four or five years, she basically did nothing...But I was surprised that at one time, she told me that she had worked for ten years and was still a Lecturer, that she sometimes felt she was a loser. She has no project and no published articles in recent years, and she felt that she was a failure in school except for teaching. I was quite shocked by her feeling’.*

‘…我的一个同事…我觉得她做了很多工作，在我们部门能扛起半边天。我们的心理实验室是她自己建的。她特别能干。后来生了孩子后她完全沉默了，四五年来，她基本上什么都没做…但我很惊讶，有一次，她告诉我，她工作了十年，还是个讲师，有时觉得自己很失败。她这几年没有任何项目，也没有发表过任何文章，她觉得除了教学之外，她在学校是一个失败者。我被她的这种感觉震惊了。’

Women gradually lose their competitive advantage in the shift of their focus to taking care of their families, which seemed like a dim future for this unmarried respondent. *Chu* added,

*‘…because I'm not married and have no children, but if I have children in the future, I think I will (focus on children). I think my (female) colleagues will’.*

‘…因为我没有结婚也没有孩子，但如果我将来有孩子，我想我会的(关注孩子)。  
我想我的（女性）同事会的。’

The low proportion of female leaders in the middle and senior leadership and the lack of successful female role models in the working environment have led to difficulties for women in pursuing senior leadership.

The above three reasons were the main factors that resulted in the difficulties of promotion in mid-career. Besides, issues related to whether gender had affected one's career were not particularly prominent in the interview data; most of the interviewees responded that they did not feel greatly affected because they were prepared for their responsibilities as women. However, only *Yang* made it clear that her gender influenced her career. She graduated and worked in a top-class university in China; she and some of her colleagues graduated in the same year and they stayed in this university as Counsellors, all being familiar with each other. During her ten years of working, the women who were significantly better at working than men did not get promoted commonly, but almost all of her male colleagues got promoted. In addition, according to the interviewees' experiences and feelings, women

would give up some career development opportunities because of the responsibility for their families. Whether they admitted it or not, it was also an influence.

### **5.6.2. The Promotion Criteria**

In order to understand what kind of promotion pressure the respondents were facing, the first point to stress here is the requirements of the promotion in the Chinese higher education. Due to different responsibilities and work contents, there were 13 academic staff and three administrative staff in the interviews. The promotion requirements of the academic staff will be discussed first.

The requirements of academic staff relied on two aspects: one is the performance appraisal standards of their current positions (annual or every several years), which was similar to Key Performance Indicators (KPI) in companies. This normally included the number of teaching hours and the number and the quality of research programmes. The other aspect was certain other requirements that are needed if they want to achieve a higher level of professional title. First, *Qian* gave the current policy on performance in her university, which elaborated a general overview of the requests and examples in the Chinese higher education:

*'We sign a three-year contract with the university in every three years. And now the new contract is a four-year contract... The contract is to stipulate what you have to accomplish in the three years... There are corresponding standards. After three years of assessment, they use these standards to assess each one... When it's done, you're done (successfully)... then each post has corresponding teaching tasks, publishing papers, and applying for projects. You need to finish them one by one. If you didn't finish it... the school will finally decide that you are... failed to finish, that is, your three-year employment period is unqualified, and you just failed in the past three years. If it is unqualified, the punishment measures shall also have corresponding provisions'.*

‘我们是一签就签三年的合同，然后现在新签的合同是四年的…合同里面就是要规定你比方这三年你必须完成什么…都有相应的有标准的。三年之后进行考核，你完成了没有？完成了，你就是完成了…然后每一条每一个岗对应的要完成哪些教学任务，要完成哪些发表论文的任务，要完成哪些，就是申请课题的任务都有相应的规定的，你要一项一项去对的…最后就是学校他会认定你是…你结果是哪一项没有完成，那这就是你这三年的聘期不合格，你就刚过去的三年聘期不合格。评级不合格的，都有哪些惩罚措施也都有相应的规定的。’

For each teaching or research post, each contract signed with the university specified the teaching and research tasks within the contract period. Among the interviewees, seven were Lecturers and five were Associate Professors. For the seven Lecturers, they were aiming at Associate Professor titles, and at present, the basic condition for an Associate Professor was to have a Doctor's degree. Thus, those interviewees were studying for Doctorates in order to meet this standard. If Doctoral degree holders entered the university to work, they would transfer from internship to a formal Lecturer, following the procedures within a short period of time. After that, there would be a ‘golden two-year’ promotion period. In this period, the promotion would be easier than after. This does not mean that the standard of promotion was lower, but due to the time period of entering the university, the time of being assessed was relatively short. It was comparatively easy to complete the corresponding amount of teaching hours and research projects within two years. If they missed the opportunity of this ‘golden two-year’ and waited for a few more years, then all these criteria would be different. For example, *Feng*, who had just started her career in higher education with her PhD degree, expressed her concern:

*‘...if it's not within two years, its requirements will be higher, and there will be the requirement of more teaching hours...If it can't be achieved, then the time can't be predicted, because I don't know, there is a very competitive relationship, and there are more involved’.*

‘…然后如果两年内没有定职的话，他的要求就更高了，就有课时量的要求了…如果达不到的话，那时间就没办法预计，因为不知道还有竞争的关系，还涉及的更多了。’

*Chen* was in the same region as where *Feng* worked, and she confirmed this situation in her narration:

*‘Generally speaking, it's more than five years from the Lecturer to the Associate Professor. It's only within two years after you graduate from PhD, that is to say, you have a PhD degree, and... three achievements, which are above class C-journals, and you can be directly appointed... if you haven't achieved enough results in the past two years, and you haven't been appointed as an Associate Professor, you have to wait another five years. After five years of graduation, you will be evaluated according to the normal process of conferring the Associate Professor... and the competition may be fiercer’.*

‘一般从假设到副教授是五年以上，它只有博士毕业两年之内你可以直接去定职副教授，就是你有博士学位，然后还有就是三个成果，三个 C 类以上的成果可以直接去定职…但是如果你一直没有评上，比如说你在这两年之内成果不够，没有定职副教授，你就可以再等五年，博士毕业五年以后，你就按照正常评定副教授的过程去评估…然后竞争可能会激烈一些。’

However, due to the differences in development between regions and universities, the requirements of the same promotion level may be different in other regions, as described by *Sun*:

*‘There is a mechanism for teachers to confer their professional titles throughout the country. But each province has its own differences. Even in some colleges and universities, if they have the right of self-evaluation, they will make some rules themselves. Like our university has an independent evaluation right, so it will have the corresponding analogy’.*

‘教师评职称的话，全国有一个机制的。但是每个省它又有区别，甚至于有的高校他如果有自主评审权的话，他自己也会制定一些规则。像我们学校是有自主评审权的，所以它会有相应的一个要求。’

Due to the imbalance of economic development between the east and the west part of China, educational resources were also unbalanced. Most of the high-level universities are located in the eastern region. The talented people were in favour of these developed areas, so the competition was more intense. The promotion standards may be stricter than those similar institutions in less development areas. On top of the basic requirements, there would be more difficult requirements. In the western region, where the economic and social development was relatively slow, and due to the serious brain drain, these assessment standards should be more flexible.

Wang's workplace is located in the Yangtze River Delta, which is one of the most developed areas in mainland China. Coincidentally, she failed to pass the evaluation of being a Professor the day before the interview, but she had already been preparing for the next selection since she knew she was failed. She needed to repeat her task of promotion for the next year, which was a considerably heavy task:

*‘... I also need to do my tasks, because it is a national social science fund project, and the requirements are quite high, and I need to publish at least five CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) journal articles...in three years... I have a key textbook for universities in the provincial level to be published, and then I'd better be able to guide students. For example, students have innovative plan training programmes, we also have national and provincial level programmes, and then the senior students need to write graduation papers, and outstanding graduation papers...or finish two or three Excellent Theses of this kind of advanced innovation project guidance for college students’.*

‘...我还要把我手上的课题给做掉，因为它是一个国家社科基金项目，然后要求还是挺高的，然后要发至少五篇左右的 CSSCI 来源期刊...应该三年左右结题...我的规划就是我有一本省里的高等学校的重点教材要出版，然后最好还能够指导学生，比如说学生也有大学生创新计划训练项目，我们也有国家级省级，还有到时候学生毕业写毕业论文，还有优秀毕业论文的这种包括省级校级优秀毕业论文的评选...或者说完成两三个这种高级别的大学生创新项目指导的优秀论文的数量能够再多一点。’

In order to enhance her competitiveness, Wang needed to publish in the domestic core journals (CSSCI journal), conduct national level projects and publish her own monographs. Moreover, her aim was high, and it took a long time and much energy to achieve. This pressure was common among this group of mid-career academic women. In the face of such pressure, many teachers chose to stay as Associate Professors, and some even gave up the idea of promotion. As Li said,

*'Now I'm an Associate Professor, I want to be a Professor. I've got a Doctor's degree. But now they are adjusting the conditions for the conferring of professional titles. It's getting higher and higher. I think it's basically too much pressure. I don't want to invest so much, I think, really. This is the rule of the game. Others have made these rules, I just need to meet the rules, but I can choose not to meet. Because these rules make me feel a lot of pressure on my life, no happiness, and then it will affect my family life, and then it will also affect my enthusiasm for teaching, so why should I? Am I right? I don't have to follow their rules. It's not necessarily fair'.*

‘现在到了副教授，就想着评个教授呗，读了博士，但是我现在正在调整评职称的条件，越来越高，我就觉得基本上压力太大，我就不想投入这么多了，我觉得。真的。这就是一个游戏规则。别人制定了这些规则，我就是要迎合，但是我也可以选择不迎合。因为这些规则，让你对生活你就觉得很大压力，没有幸福感了，然后会影响你的家庭生活，然后还影响你教学的这种热情，那我何必呢？对吗？我不一定去跟从他的那种规则，不见得是公平的。’

A similar view was shared by *Qian*, who was an Associate Professor and had worked in a university for 17 years but had recently obtained a Doctor's degree. She thought that it would take at least three years for her to be promoted as a Professor. First of all, she must meet the standards set by the university, such as the workload of teaching, and the numbers of provincial level and national level projects, and the publications, which should be CSSCI papers. Secondly, there were proportional restrictions in respect of promotion. For example, 30% of the people who applied could be on the shortlist and only one of the two people could succeed. As *Qian* put it:

*'So, I can only say that in such a period of time, I meet these conditions, I meet the minimum requirements, I am eligible for promotion, but whether I can be promoted or not, it is another matter'.*

‘所以你达到也只能说你在这个时间段，你满足了这些条件，你达到了最低要求，你就有资格晋升，但是具体你能不能晋升的上是另外一回事，对。’

In addition to these promotion requirements that one should meet, there were also some objective factors that cannot be controlled or foreseen by oneself. Thus, it is not easy to be promoted to a higher level.

*Wu* held a Master's degree and had been an Associate Professor for many years; she agreed with this view. She wanted to improve the effect of classroom teaching within the scope of her ability, but she struggled to write qualified articles to publish. She thought that writing articles was painful for her. She hoped to give new lessons and accept new challenges to improve herself, but since she did not meet the criteria for promotion, these opportunities would not belong to her.

*'...I've been suffering... I think the evaluation of university teachers should focus more on the actual effect of teaching... The teacher's most important role is to promote*

*students to learn, but I think this is very difficult to evaluate, right? It's hard to value. But I used to write articles, I found that when I wrote articles, it affected my teaching'.*  
‘我一直都痛苦…我觉得大学老师的考评应该更多的看教学的实效…老师最重要作用是促进他去学，我觉得但这个很难考评，对不对？但我以前也写写文章，但是我就发现我写文章的时候反而影响了我好好的教学生了。’

There were three full-time administrative staff in the interviews, who were *Wei, Han* and *Yang*. Some academic staff had the experience in administrative work before, but they had successfully transferred to teaching and research posts. *Shen*'s responsibility was between the two categories; she should be an administrator, but since she had achieved a PhD degree not long ago, she started to pay more attention to teaching currently. Regarding those three, *Wei* had worked in her current university for 21 years; she was the Deputy Director of Student Affairs Department, a middle level leadership position, mainly responsible for the employment and mental health of students in the university. She had no plans to continue her studies and had no hope of promotion currently. *Yang* shared a similar experience with her. Having started as a Counsellor, *Yang* had been an Office Director since 2017, which was a division level title for administrative staff; she had worked in her current university for 10 years. To be specific, the promotion of the administrative levels is : section level - division level - department level - minister level (top) (e.g.: the president of a university is the department level, which is the highest level of the administrative post in higher education). However, as mentioned in the first part of this chapter (see section 5.3.1.), due to the lack of uniform standards in the Counsellor promotion system, many Counsellors had been stagnant in the middle-level leadership positions for a long time or transferred to teaching positions. The youngest one among them was *Han*, who had been a Counsellor for seven years and she was in the leadership level of the Counsellors.

In the interview, only *Yang* mentioned that if she went further, she could be promoted to the deputy division department level, but it was only her expectation, she had no specific plan,

and she said she could only leave it to fate. *Wei* mentioned that she had been in the position of deputy division for 13 years; she also left her promotion to fate. In addition, the three administrators seldom mentioned the promotion standards. Only *Han* mentioned them once:

*‘...our assessment is based on the administrative assessment, which is the normal condition for you to be responsible for your work at the end of the year’.*

‘...我们的考核就是按行政考核，就是年终正常你工作负责的条件。’

Although the interviewees did not specify about the promotion requirements of administrative posts, according to available literatures, in addition to the ideological and moral aspects, it is mainly based on the working years, actual performance, research projects, and certain qualifications. According to the different levels of promotion, the requirement was different, especially in publishing papers; the difficulty of publishing papers was gradually increasing. From the perspective of the functions of higher education institutions, the main responsibilities were teaching and scientific research, and the administrative management was only the service department, which inevitably placed these departments in a marginalised state. Compared with the teaching and scientific research system, the administrative management system was relatively underestimated. From the interviews, most of the interviewees who transferred from Counsellors to Lecturers were considering about the difficulty of promotion in the administrative system and felt that a Counsellor’s future development was very limited. Therefore, the biggest obstacles for administrative staff came from the defects of the promotion system itself.

### **5.6.3. Publishing**

Concerns were expressed about publishing, which was one of the key elements of the promotion requirements. A variety of perspectives were expressed on publishing from the interviewees, and they were asked to share their recent experience and described how they felt about it. Negative comments were common amongst the interviewees on publishing. In

this section, the general views on publishing are presented first, followed by the three themes that emerged from the analysis of the comments from all the interviewees on the academic publishing environment in China.

In the early interviews stage, this issue did not receive enough attention, so *Zhao*, *Qian* and *Sun* did not talk much on publishing. As the interviewing went on, it was found that everyone would mention it when talking about promotion requirements. Eleven interviewees described their own experiences and gave views from their own perspectives while the administrators did not pay much attention on it.

When asked about publishing, the interviewees were unanimous in the view that it was 'difficult' and 'stressed'. As *Chen* said, '*It's quite stressed*'. *Wei* thought that to publish an article was '*relatively difficult*'. *Zhou* expressed that '*It's very difficult for our English major teachers to publish articles*' and *Wu* said, '*I've been suffering*' when she mentioned her latest experience of publishing. Moreover, the higher-level professional journals were more difficult to publish in, as *Jiang* said:

*'Actually, it's still difficult to publish in some good-level journals, such as the C-level journal'.*

‘其实现在因为你要发一些好的级别的刊物，你像 C 刊的话，其实还是会比较困难的。’

As the interviewees were mostly from humanities and social sciences majors, all of them were faced with the same problem: there were few domestic journals on related disciplines. *Zhou* said that '*There are few publications in English major*' because she focused on '*English linguistics, mainly teaching, and now I am engaged in other aspects of teaching*' (‘我本身就是学英语语言学的，主要是教学，现在又从事了教学其他方面’); it was difficult for her to publish articles in her professional field. *Zheng* also mentioned that in her major, it was very difficult to publish in top journals,

*'To publish such high-level articles, I think it is more difficult than abroad. Especially in our major, there are only a few high-level periodicals in our country, only a few'.*

‘要发这种高水平的文章，我觉得比国外还困难，特别是像我们这种专业，国内的高水平的期刊就那么几个，真的就是说只有几个。’

More concerns were expressed by *Chen*, because she specialised in special education. She said,

*'It's very difficult, because I just said that there is only one national C- journal for special education majors. There are so many Doctoral students in special education in China, and Master's supervisors, Doctor's supervisors and teachers should publish in it, as well as in normal times'.*

‘对，挺难的，因为我刚说了，像我们特教专业的全国 C 刊只有一本。中国特殊教育有那么多博士，硕导、博导、老师都要在上面发，平时也都要发。’

From undergraduate students to Doctoral students, and teachers at all levels of higher education, they all need to publish their works. They were all aiming at this one top special education journal and there were not many non-top journals as well. Moreover, *Chen* explained that due to the nature of the research objects, there were many restrictions and limitations for them to conduct empirical research, and writing up top papers was even harder.

To sum up, three themes emerged from the analysis of the comments from all the interviewees on the academic publishing environment in China, which were as follows:

**Theme One:** *The review cycle of publishing was long and there was no clear feedback for the manuscripts that were rejected.*

On average, it took one year to publish an article from submitting the manuscript to publishing it officially. For example, *Feng* gave her experience, *'the fastest is one year. That doesn't count your writing'*. The relatively faster writer could complete the whole

process from collecting data to editing within one year. ‘*We spent a year from collecting and editing*’, said *Wei*. Some may take a year and half, like *Shen*:

*‘I think it should take half a year to publish, the whole cycle, from the initial stage to the actual publication. It’s really a long time’.*

‘整个周期从文章最初投出去一直到真正发表出来，我觉得应该要有半年到一年的时间，时间还确实挺长的。’

The respondents talked less about the efforts that they spent on writing and data collection. Most of the feedback was that the editors’ review took a long time after the articles were submitted. If the first draft failed to pass the editor’s review, the author did not receive any detailed comments. The interviewees thought that was a great waste of time and energy, which made them feel extremely frustrated. *Chen* shared a story of her recent unsuccessful submission:

*‘I was recently rejected by them for an article, which was submitted for about half a year. Originally, the manuscript needed three months to review, and then it became four months. Finally, it took six months for them to reply to me, and they let me to modify it. I revised two drafts, which were rejected. And they didn’t give me any reason. They didn’t say what was wrong with my article. Generally speaking, if you don’t meet their requirements, you won’t pass it’.*

‘像我最近就被他拒了一篇文章，投了大概有半年，本来手稿其实三个月，后面就定了四个月，一直到过了六个月对方才回复我，然后让我修改。我修改了两稿之后还是去稿了。而且他没有去稿的理由，他没有说你这稿件到底哪里不合适。如果一般的话就说你不符合我们的要求，就不去搞了。’

As she has a background of studying abroad, *Chen* compared the differences between the publication in domestic journals and in the foreign journals:

*‘We wanted to publish in international journals. Because it has some advantages, that is, at least the editor will tell you what the problem is, and you can change it according*

*to them. Then even if they don't use it, you can submit for other ones after you revise. It's OK. But I think there is no reason to do it in China, so this kind of feeling is very depressing'.*

‘因为外刊它有一些好处，就是最起码编辑会告诉你到底是哪里的问题，你可以根据他着手去改。然后哪怕他不用了，你改完之后也可以再去投其他的，也是可以的。但我觉得国内就是没有理由去搞，所以这种觉得让人觉得很郁闷的。’

*Chen* pointed out clearly that one of the advantages of publishing in the foreign journals was that the editor would give a detailed reply to specify the publishing standards. The author could improve the writing according to the feedbacks, avoiding unnecessary waste of time and energy.

Among the interviewers, *Li* had the experience in publishing articles overseas. Her remarks on the publishing system of domestic academic journals were very convincing:

*'I don't want to publish in China now. I really don't have a sense of achievement. I feel embarrassed sometimes. No one reads it, and they just publish it after receiving your money. Do you think this is really valuable? In the international community, people will treat it seriously, give you some suggestions and revise it, and then publish it. People may also read it. I think it's a little valuable, but this cycle is too long, and we need to invest too much time'.*

‘我现在基本上就不太想在国内发了，真的没有成就感，完全没有成就感，我觉得有时候发出去自己都觉得难堪。没人看，然后就是收了你的钱才发，你就会觉得我这个真的有价值吗？在国际上人家会认认真真的在看，然后给你提意见再修改，然后发表出去，人家可能也会去看，你这就觉得有点价值，但是这个周期太长了，你要投入太多时间。’

What makes her feel embarrassed was that publishing in domestic journals did not actually give her a sense of achievement, because almost no one read it. After publishing articles in international journals, the article could be noticed and cited by scholars all over the world.

The purpose of publishing papers was not limited to meeting the promotion requirements or for the performance appraisal. This would make the author feel that their research has been valued and made some contributions.

For other interviewees, they were asked whether they had thought of publishing articles in foreign journals. Some had thought about it, but their academic English writing was weak, and they were not familiar with the publishing procedures of the international journals. As *Wu* said, '*it takes more time and needs a certain academic level*'. She was not confident in her academic writing in Chinese, and English was even harder.

***Theme Two: The promotion requirements emphasised the publications rather than teaching, which brought conflicts to the interviewees' daily work and time allocation.***

The previous discussion has mentioned that the evaluation of professional titles concentrates on the academic achievements of the teachers, which is the published works in this context (see section 5.7.2.). However, as a university teacher, teaching is an essential work. The interviewees generally agreed that research and teaching accounted for half of their everyday work, respectively. In the current evaluation system, the assessment of the teaching part was mainly based on the amount of teaching hours, and more attention was put on publications, which caused many teachers distress. For example, in the conversation with *Chen*, she mentioned that her department was newly established, and the young teachers should strive to be well-prepared in teaching and complete article writing, which put them under great pressure.

*'I think that teaching and research are originally a process of mutual assistance. But because of our evaluation system, we just want to do research and write articles, not consider how to do well in class. Our young teachers often chat with each other. If we want to do well in class, we will suffer a lot... Many teachers in our department are very attentive in class, have a good relationship with students, are very satisfied by*

*students... our department was built relatively late, basically all of us are young teachers, so we all feel that the pressure of research is still great'.*

‘我觉得教学和科研它本来是一个相互辅助的这样的一个过程。但是因为我们的这样的一个评价体系，就导致大家只想去做研究发文章，而不想着怎么去把课上好。我们年轻老师之间也会经常去聊，如果我们一心想把课上好，其实也是很吃亏的...我们系很多老师上课都很用心，跟学生关系也很好，学生也都很满意，学生也觉得学到了很多...但是科研这方面就因为我们系年轻老师比较多，我们系建的比较晚，基本上都是年轻老师，所以大家都觉得科研的压力都还是大。’

*Wu* has a similar expression on the unreasonable evaluation system:

*'To tell you the truth ... I think the quality of the publishing atmosphere is too poor... I've been suffering... I think the evaluation of university teachers should focus more on the actual effect of teaching, that is, how much students are stimulated by your teaching, whether you have the motivation to promote the students' learning... But I used to write articles, I found that when I wrote articles, it affected my teaching'.*

‘说实话...我觉得学术太水了...我一直都痛苦...我觉得大学老师的考评应该更多的看教学的实效，就是学生在你老师这里受到了多大的激发，你有没有推动他的学习动力...但我以前也写写文章，但是我就发现我写文章的时候反而影响了我好好的教学生了。’

She believed that she needed much time and energy to devote into her research and writing, but this research may not be closely relevant to her teaching, so she always struggled. Writing a high-level article that can be published would take up too much of her time and energy, which would not help her teaching. Besides, after the article was published, she expressed a lack of sense of accomplishment. *Wu* said,

*'I really feel that publishing articles is like completing the workload of research and helping me to confer my title... I don't think there's any help for others. I don't see much feedback from others on my articles. Right, I don't have any sense of accomplishment'.*

‘我真觉得发文章就是好像完成了科研工作量，然后有助于我评职称了，真正从发了之后再去看我的文章，对别人有没有什么，对别人对我文章的反馈看得很少，对，没有什么成就感。’

Both the process of publishing the article and the results have made her lose confidence in publishing.

**Theme Three:** *Due to the importance of publishing in the evaluation system, the quality of journal articles was varied in the prosperous publishing industry.*

Among the interviewees, Wang was also an editor of her discipline, and she explained some phenomena in the industry from the perspective of her editorial work. Because in the evaluation standard of a scholar, publications were an explicit achievement, which was easy to be measured and seen by the outside world, she stated:

*‘...the whole group attaches great importance to this (publishing), because it is an external reflection of the achievement, and it can be shown...the evaluation of a person's achievements, as well as the evaluation of the success of researchers in universities, depends on how many papers you have, how many high-level papers you have, and your monographs, how influential they are, how many textbooks, and whether they are listed as provincial or national quality textbooks. So, in this case, the publishing industry is certainly very popular, but...when it comes to the quality just mentioned, the quality is uneven, or the overall quality is not high’.*

‘...所以整个大家都是很看重这一个，因为这是一种外在的成果的一种体现，然后他是能拿得出来的...包括我们在中国对于一个学科的评价，对一个人成果的评价，也对于高校我的科研人员的这种成果的评价，也都是看你得有论文有多少篇高级别的有多少篇，然后你的专著有几本，影响力有多大，教材有多少，有没有被列为省里或者是国家精品教材之类的。所以这种情况下出版行业肯定是极为火爆的，但是说到现实，说到刚才说的质量上来，质量参差不齐，或者说总体质量不高。’

Therefore, both the evaluation system and the individual scholars tend to value publications, which inevitably leads to the prosperity of the publishing industry. But this prosperity could bring negative effects, and the most undesirable one was the uneven quality of the publications. People were actively participating in publishing in order to show their academic level, so those who were seeking for immediate returns and instant benefit may have committed some academic misconducts. Plagiarism and copying were the most representative behaviours. As *Wu* said,

*'This is precisely the case in many domestic scientific research studies, especially in the liberal arts; people look at others' work and copy from them'.*

‘国内好多科研恰就是这样，尤其是是文科的，就是看看抄抄。’

*Wang* had the same point of view:

*'I think the publication of the textbook is particularly chaotic. No matter who is compiling the textbook, it seems that you copy me when compiling the textbook, and I copy your textbook...and there is not much innovation'.*

‘我就觉得教材的出版特别的混乱，不管什么人都在编教材，教材编来编去好像都是你抄我，我抄你的是教材...没有多大的一个创新。’

Closely related to this phenomenon was the lack of empirical research. Many interviewees said that people preferred to do library-based research in order to meet the requirements of publishing, or even did not conduct any research by themselves, as *Wang* commented:

*'I did more empirical research...Some of our teachers include the Doctoral supervisors, whose research is that kind of literature based, or a kind of research called speculative. Our colleagues also have this kind of research, that is, they do not go to kindergarten to do research, pure speculative, pure reading and writing...I think the content will be very empty'.*

‘我这边更多的是实地调查...我们有的老师包括博士生导师，他的研究就是那种文献，或者是叫思辨性的一种研究，我们自己的同事也有这样的，就是他不去幼儿园做调研，他就是那种纯思辨，纯阅读就来写的...我觉得这样写出来会非常的空洞。’

*Wang* insisted on empirical research and frequently used it; she was sceptical about the articles based on pure speculation or library-based and thought that they were not convincing in the pre-school education area.

In fact, some teachers who have worked for a long time and have not been trained by systematic research methods were struggling with conducting research. For example, *Wu* and *Zheng*, both of them having MA degrees and having worked in the higher education for 20 and 7 years, respectively, said that they had not learned how to complete a research project when they were students, so they felt confused and stressed. Moreover, in the early years, the requirements for publishing were far less demanding. *Zhou* had been working in her current university for 20 years; she recalled that since 2005, publishing journal articles had become particularly important for teachers in higher education.

*‘From 2005, I began to realize that the evaluation and engagement of professional titles are separated. There is a condition for you when you evaluate a professional title. At that time, it may be about seniority, and then there may be requirements for academic qualifications and so on. But it depends on your ability’.*

‘从 2005 年我开始意识到，就是因为职称评聘分开了，你评上职称必须聘上聘就是有一个条件，当时评的时候可能是论资排辈，然后可能还有学历的要求等等。但是这个聘他就要看你的实力了。’

Therefore, the lack of learning how to conduct research in the early years and the neglect of empirical research made them feel more pressure in the current academic environment. As publications counted as an essential evaluating indicator in the promotion of the academic

staff in the current Chinese higher education, struggling with conducting research and publishing articles have become insurmountable obstacles to their future career path.

#### **5.6.4. Work-life Balance**

It is an unavoidable topic for women on balancing the relationship between family and career. As discussed in RQ2, being a teacher in university was viewed as a good choice for a woman to take care of her families (see section 5.4.1.). Except for one interviewee (*Chu*) who was single, all the other respondents had at least one child to take care of, and they were in dual-earner families. Although they were in different age groups and had different years of work, they were all in middle-career positions and had children of different ages to care for. The work and family balance of the interviewees will be elaborated in the following two aspects. The first is the pressures from childcare; the second is the conflicts between career and family care, as well as the parents' help of childcare, which is very unique in Chinese culture.

##### **5.6.4.1. The Pressures From Childcare.**

Many interviewees expressed that their interests and hobbies had changed after having children. As *Zhou* mentioned, when she was young, she liked to go out to travel and shopping,

*'Go out to travel, I also liked shopping when I was young..... Except shopping, I may go out with my husband or my neighbour for a tour or else on weekends... It's a good time'.*

‘出去玩，购物，年轻的时候也喜欢除了购物...除了购物没事的时候，周末的时候可能和我老公或者是邻居一块出去旅游什么的...过得挺逍遥的。

But after having a child, her daily life was arranged around the child. *Zhou* spent most of her weekends accompanying her child.

Similarly, the conversation with *Wu* started with the topic of children and families. Since she was an academic visitor in the UK at the time of the interview, she said,

*'I came to England mainly because I want to bring my child here... In my spare time, to be honest, I think that since I became a mother, especially after the children started to receive education in primary school, there is not much spare time for me. Unlike before, there was lots of spare time. Anyway, when they sleep, I can relax. I used to have free time to read novels or watch TV. There's no time now'.*

‘我来英国，主要是带着孩子来的，所以我觉得我其实更大部分的精力还是花在孩子身上。空闲的时间时，说实话，我觉得自从当了妈妈之后，尤其是孩子上了小学开始接受教育之后，空闲的时间都不多了，不像以前有大把的空闲时间，有孩子之前还有孩子还是婴儿的时候，反正未来来他睡了你就可以，我以前有空闲时间就可以好好的看那种上小说或者是追剧都可以，现在就没有那个时间。’

*Wu*'s husband was also a university teacher; he was busier than her.

*'To be honest, his participation is quite low, he is very busy. He is a very ambitious person'.*

‘说实话，他参与度比较低。他太忙了，他自己是事业心非常强一个人。’

Thus, *Wu* spent more time accompanying her child. The precondition of her future planning was to wait for her child to go to high school and have the ability to study independently, then she could put more time and energy into work.

Like *Chen*, she had twins in kindergarten age, and her husband was also a university teacher. When the children were just one year old, she and her husband began to study for a Doctorate at the same time. Her husband was studying locally, while she went to Beijing to study.

*'... the process was very hard. We needed to study while taking care of children. As soon as we got married, we had children. It's not very good, there are many conflicts'.*

‘所以这个过程其实还是觉得挺辛苦的，我们又要读书，还要带孩子。不太好，所以其实冲突还是挺多的。’

Before *Chen* finished her studies, the two children had to go to the kindergarten in her hometown. She had to use the weekend to go back and forth between the two places every month. So she gave up a lot of leisure time to take care of the children.

When these mothers talked about their children, they took all the responsibility of educating children on their own shoulders. The level of the father's participation in childcare was very low. These women put their mother's responsibility in the first place and put their career and other hobbies at the back of the list. Gradually, they became accustomed to this kind of life and sacrificed their plans.

#### **5.6.4.2. The Conflicts Between Career and Family**

Secondly, most of the interviewees adjusted their career plan after they got married and had children, in order to better take care of their families. Looking beyond the childcare aspects of the family situation, being married was associated with the tendency of these women to seek flexible time work. Thus, the interviewees with extensive child-rearing or family demands may be faced with job transfer or have successfully transferred to teaching posts to prevent their work from excessively interfering with family responsibilities. Only two interviewees mentioned that when they were young, they worked too hard and occasionally neglected to take care of their children. They all thought that they did not fulfil their responsibilities as mothers.

*Jiang* was halfway to transferring from the administrative post to teaching post; one of the job transfer requirements was a six-month overseas academic visit, which was a little difficult for her in her current situation:

*'My child is now in elementary school and ready for junior high school; when he is in junior high school for the next three years, I may allocate more time to take care of him, so I will not consider academic visits abroad during that time. Because there may be a lack of companionship for my child in this critical adolescence stage, so I may not consider transferring, maybe, maybe three years later'.*

‘因为他现在小升初，马上现在正好是这个时候，小升初在他初中的三年的话，我觉得从我的时间分配来说，我可能会多分配一些时间给孩子，所以我可能在三年的期间，我不考虑去做访学访学半年的这样一个时间，因为可能这样的话，可能对孩子的陪伴就是在青春期的关键的青春期的陪伴可能会，会有缺失，所以暂时我可能不会考虑我的...转评的这样一个事情...可能会是三年以后的事情。’

*Jiang* reinforced her view on career decisions that were favourable to the family:

*'For this moment, I think family life is a very important part of my life...I personally think that at my age, it's basically OK, I think I've reached my expectation, I may still be focusing more on my family at the stage from 38 to 41 or 42 years old'.*

‘目前来说的话，我就觉得家庭生活也是我的生活中很重要的一个部分...我觉得在我这个年龄，我觉得还基本可以，我觉得可以已经达到了一个预期，我可能会在我的目前的这样三十八，到四十一二这样的一个阶段，可能还是会更加倾向于家庭这一块。’

As noted, *Zheng* was a Lecturer with a Master's degree; she understood that her qualification was not eligible for the future promotion, so she had the plan for further study, but her children were too young:

*'The main reason is that now I have two young children, one is three and the other is five years old, and I think I may have to wait for a year or two, when they are older, I think I still want to continue to study, or hope to get a Doctoral degree'.*

‘因为主要是现在我有两个小孩还挺小，然后我就觉得可能要稍微等一两年，等他们稍微大一点，我觉得我还是想继续能够深造学习，还是希望能够取得博士研究生的学位。’

Similarly, one of the goals of *Shen*'s academic visiting abroad was to take her 10-year-old daughter to experience the different education system in another country. She believed that her child's education should take precedence over her self-development.

The majority of participants agreed with the view that their children's education was more important than their career. It was worthwhile to sacrifice one's promotion opportunity to take good care of their children. As *Li* pointed out,

*'There must be influence, but it should not be treated like this. I should never put my career planning above all else in my life'.*

‘你说影响肯定是有，但是不应该去这么看待，这个我一辈子不应该，不应该把我的工作职业规划放在高于一切的位置。’

*Sun* commented,

*'I think at every stage that most women still pay more attention to family and children. Yes, even when she's busy, she has to take care of her children'.*

‘我觉得是每个阶段都有可能大多数女性还是更关注家庭，更关注孩子。对，即便很忙的时候他也要很兼顾孩子。是这样子。’

Even in their advice to young academic women, some of the participants suggested that the young female academic should complete her studies and accumulate necessary academic resources before she gets married and has children. For instance, *Zheng* said,

*'From my own point of view, if I go back to some point of the past, I will definitely get my Ph.D. degree and then go to university to find a job. Because when I come to university to work and have a family, there are a lot of constraints...I think that I really*

*pay more time for my family, if I want to study further, and take care of my children in the meantime, it does have some impact'.*

‘我觉得从我自身来说，我觉得再回到过去的点的话，我一定会把博士学位来了以后我再去学校。因为当你来到学校以后，然后有了家庭以后确实有很多的束缚...我认为我对家的时间的付出确实更多了，就是自己想要深造学习的话，又带着孩子的话，确实还是有一些影响的。’

From the perspective of *Zheng*'s own experience, she kindly reminded women who were about to enter the university to work that after marriage, life was not conducive to their own career development, so the important promotion plans, or tasks should be arranged before they get married.

Unlike the Western background literature on family care, Chinese parents took the initiative to help to take care of their grandchildren. Almost all respondents with children mentioned their parents or husband's parents helping to look after their children before primary school. The grandparents were mainly responsible for dropping off and picking up children from kindergarten and taking care of children before parents arrive at home. For instance, *Wang* could not take good care of her children because she and her husband worked in different cities, so her mother's sister came to help.

*'She stayed there for three years with us. After the child went to kindergarten, she went back to her hometown'.*

‘她跟着我们在那边待了三年，等小孩上了幼儿园之后她就回老家了。’

*Chen* studied for a Doctorate degree shortly after her baby was born, but she and her husband were not studying in the same city, so she took her two children with her to study. Her own parents hired (and paid) a nanny for her, and both parents took turns looking after their children when they went to kindergarten:

*'When they went to kindergarten, we no longer hired nannies, my mum and my husband's mum took turns'.*

‘然后保姆是一直带到孩子要上幼儿园，上幼儿园就没有再请保姆，就是奶奶跟姥姥轮流。’

Besides, parents' help gave them more time to deal with their own teaching tasks and research, like Wu recalled:

*'At that time, my child was very little, and my parents helped me. I don't need to spend a lot of time with my child. I have more time and energy'.*

‘那个时候孩子还很小，我父母还在。我不需要花很多时间在孩子身上还有时间，还有体力。’

In addition, parents' help was generally limited to taking care of daily life, such as doing housework and shopping for daily necessities. Children's education still depends on the school and the young couples. As Zheng put it,

*'...parents help us basically do housework, and children's affairs are depending on us and the school, our parents are less involved in education'.*

‘父母帮我们基本上就是做家务方面的事情，然后孩子方面的事情基本上都是我们和学校，父母参与的比较少，在教育方面。’

## **5.7. RQ5: What Strategies, If Any, Do the Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education Adopt To Overcome Barriers and Pursue Career Opportunities?**

In the previous answers to the four research questions, the career trajectory, career planning, and obstacles encountered in the female leaders in the higher education career path have been discussed. The fifth research question focused on the participants' strategies to overcome the barriers and pursue promotion opportunities. To answer this question, the promotion intention of the participants was assessed firstly according to the analysis of the

survey and interviews. The second part presents the strategies they adopted to overcome the barriers and pursue career opportunities. The third part listed the suggestions to young women who aimed to work in the higher education in the future by the interviewees.

### **5.7.1. The Promotion Intention**

From the presentation of the quantitative findings (see section 5.2.), Question 16 and 17 in the survey showed the promotion intention of the female teachers in universities. Question 16 aimed to look at their self-assessment on how well they are suited to their current job. The results indicated that most participants felt that they were at least matched with their current position, and those who felt they had more potential had the expectations to be promoted. No one wanted to move to a lower level of job for several years, which meant the respondents would rather be content with the status quo than move to a lower level. Thus, they were willing to pursue better positions, which indicated that the participants' desire for promotion was common. Likewise, the outcomes of Question 17 illustrated the respondents' description on the opportunities they have to develop their career. About half (197 out of 391 respondents) held optimistic options on their own promotion.

Therefore, from the results of the above two survey questions, it was clear that at least half the respondents held an optimistic attitude towards promotion. Among the rest who thought that promotion was hindered, some may have had the expectations, but were blocked for various reasons, so they did not have an optimistic attitude. So far, it could be inferred that most participants had a positive attitude towards promotion and wanted to pursue it.

Besides, from the analysis of the interviews, the interviewees had a generally positive attitude towards their future career. Combined with the findings in section 5.5.1. (*Self-evaluation of Career Planning*), a large number of the women in the middle of their career had plans for promotion and were preparing for it. The last question about career planning

in the interview was to self-rate their confidence in achieving the career plan and the full score is 100 points. Table 5.8. presents the results.

**Table 5.8.** *Self-ratings of the Interviewees' Confidence in Achieving Their Career Plan*

Teachers' name	Scores
<i>Sun</i>	70 +
<i>Li</i>	50
<i>Wu</i>	80
<i>Zheng</i>	80
<i>Wang</i>	90
<i>Feng</i>	88
<i>Chen</i>	90
<i>Chu</i>	70
<i>Wei</i>	80
<i>Jiang</i>	95
<i>Shen</i>	100
<i>Han</i>	80
<i>Yang</i>	70

Two missing interviewees did not give answers: because this question was set after the pilot study, *Zhao* and *Qian* did not answer. Further, *Zhou* was a Professor and was about to retire; she had no specific career plan, so there was no score. Except for *Li*, the other interviewees gave themselves more than 70 points, which implied that everyone was very confident in their plans, and *Shen* had 100% confidence in herself. Only *Li* gave herself as low as 50 points. When asked why the score was so low, she replied,

*'Because I was a little confident at the beginning, and then as soon as the new regulations came out, I thought it was too much, it was very difficult for me to meet them all at once, and then suddenly they were raised again, like house prices. You*

*thought you had accumulated a little money and could buy it. Suddenly the house price soared. What would you do? You will never catch up'.*

‘因为一开始还有点信心，然后一下子新的条例一出来，我就觉得算了，很难一下子提，突然就又拔高了，本来看着好像就像房价。你本来以为自己积累了一点钱了，可以买了，突然房价飙升了，你怎么办？你永远赶不上。’

The example of rising house prices was used by *Sun* as well. She planned to transfer from a Counsellor to a Lecturer, so she began her Doctoral study two years ago. But when she was about to finish it and was about to transfer her job, new transfer regulations came out, which were more demanding than before. She felt that no matter how hard she tried, she could not keep up with the ascending threshold. Her Doctoral research subject related to real estate prices, so she used the example of rising house prices, which was very appropriate to her situation.

Based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews, most of the women in their middle career stage had confidence in future plans. A small number of women stayed in the same position for internal or external reasons, but they were preparing for the possible opportunities. The obstacles on the way to promotion are diverse, in addition to the two major factors (the working environment and home or family) mentioned in sections 5.6.2. and 5.6.4. The next topic to be discussed is the major obstacle to promotion in their own perception and how they dealt with these challenges.

### **5.7.2. The Strategies They Adopted To Overcome the Barriers**

The previous discussions have presented an analysis of the obstacles and barriers in the participants' career path from several different angles, which endeavoured to answer the research questions. To sum up, the answers could be divided into two types: the first is

academic-related obstacles, and the second type is non-academic-related obstacles, which are presented in detail in Table 5.9.

**Table 5.9. The Perceived Obstacles of the Mid-Career Academic Women in HEIs**

Academic-related obstacles	Non-academic-related obstacles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get a degree (PhD)</li> <li>• Publish papers</li> <li>• Complete research projects</li> <li>• Difficult to get support from the university</li> <li>• Lack of the basic knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The workload</li> <li>• Not good at communicating with leaders</li> <li>• No advantage in competing with the older people with the seniority</li> <li>• Gender</li> </ul>

*Note.* The above rankings are not in any particular order.

In order to overcome the obstacles and relieve the pressures, the interviewees generally had three measures to take. The first one was communicating effectively with colleagues or superiors. For example, *Chen* replied that when there are problems between disciplines that are difficult to solve, she would try to discuss them with her colleagues:

*'I will talk with my colleagues, and then communicate with each other, including our department head, and ask him...the personal relationship among us is very good, so we communicate smoothly in our work'.*

‘我会跟同事去聊，然后互相去沟通，包括我们系主任，也会去问他...所以我们之间的个人关系是很好，所以我们会平时工作当中也会很顺畅地去沟通。’

*Shen* also believed that a good relationship with colleagues and leaders could be mutually beneficial:

*'One needs to communicate with colleagues repeatedly and consult them to see if there is a way to solve the problem'.*

‘一个跟同事们大家反复沟通然后请教，看看能不能有解决问题的办法。’

*Han*, who thought that there was no obstacle or pressure in her work, explained that she did not feel stress because of the harmonious relationship between her colleagues:

*‘...because we have a very good relationship in our department. Most of us have the same experience. We are young, energetic and united. Then we all help each other’.*

‘因为我们部门是一个关系特别好的部门，我们大部分都是学生工作，经历相关的老师辅导员什么上来的，然后所以大家也是那种很年轻很有活力，然后很团结，然后大家都是互帮互助去做事情。’

The second method was to find a way to relax, which was done in two ways. The first was the relaxation of leisure and entertainment and the second was the relaxation of self-improvement. As *Wei* mentioned, she preferred to *‘find someone to chat, and watch some funny plays, variety shows, and so on’*. *Sun* also noted,

*‘I may often take some other ways, such as chatting with friends, going out to relax, so as to alleviate this (pressure)’.*

‘我可能通常会采取一些其他的方式，比方说跟朋友聊聊天，会出去散散心，这样去缓解这。’

Another way to relax was to get out of the current working environment, and find opportunities to receive training and improve oneself, so as to relieve the pressure of the moment. For instance, *Wei* expressed,

*‘I think my biggest relaxation is to go out to train myself, reward myself to go out to study, recharge, and then look at people who are better than me. Maybe they will inspire me again and I can continue to do it’.*

‘我觉得我最大的放松是出去培训自己，奖励自己出去学习一下，充电，再看看比我更优秀的人，可能就又激发起来了，就继续做。’

*Wu* had the same point of view:

*'I am more sensitive to the outside world, especially the interaction with people...For example, I am going to attend classes...Anyway, I feel some pressure, but these can be overcome anyway'.*

‘因为还有我自己比较敏感，我对外界就是人与人之间的互动…比如说我要去听课…反正我就觉得有一些压力，但不是反正这些还是能够克服。’

Even if there was some pressure to learn new knowledge in an unknown environment, she would overcome it and get self-promoted in this training so as to better cope with the pressure from work.

The last one was rather a choice than a strategy, which was to give up the opportunity and be content with the status quo. *Li* and *Zhou* reported such a choice. A possible explanation could be the stage of their career. Both of them were in the late 40s and had worked in the universities for over 20 years; *Li* was an Associate Professor and *Zhou* was a Professor. Faced with increasing age and approaching retirement, they thought that if they invest a lot of time and energy to strive for a higher position, they would lose more than they gain. As *Li* responded,

*'So I think I'll give up. Because I think it's out of reach, I'll let it go, because I don't have so much time to invest'.*

‘所以我就觉得那就是放弃。因为你觉得这已经是望尘莫及了，我就算了，因为没有那么多时间投入。’

Similarly, *Zhou* replied,

*'There is a lot of pressure, it is really a lot. But how to say, in order to confer the title, sometimes I have to force myself and find a way to solve it, but now I don't think I will put so much pressure on myself, right. I don't want to do it if I can't. I'll give up'.*

‘就是我说压力很大，确实很大。但是怎么说，为了评职称，有的时候还得硬撑，也得想办法去解决，但现在我觉得我可能不会给自己那么多的压力了，对。实在干不了我就想干了。放弃。’

To sum up, combined with the barriers and obstacles in RQ4 and the difficulties described by the interviewees in this section, if the barriers are the settled rules of the promotion, which cannot be changed, they will try to improve themselves in terms of education or working ability. If they felt that their current stage was unfavourable, they would have temporary abandonment. Each interviewee had a priority for all her responsibilities, and her current choice would be adjusted according to this ranking. Moreover, in the work environment, creating an effective communication atmosphere was essential, and it was necessary to maintain a good relationship with colleagues, including their superiors and subordinates. If the pressure from work was unbearable, they would find ways to relieve the stress, which included relaxing themselves by entertainments or seeking self-improvement by participating in professional training. If they were under pressure from family, for example, they were too busy to take care of their children and families, they would hire a nanny or ask their parents for help. If they felt that there was a lack of time and energy for both family and career, they might give up some administrative affairs, concentrate on the teaching tasks and leave more time for families.

### **5.7.3. Suggestions for Young Women**

All 16 interviewees responded to this question, and they gave suggestions to young women who aimed to work in the higher education in the future. In summary, these suggestions mainly concentrated on career planning and life planning and can be concluded in the following six viewpoints.

(1). Before officially starting her work in the higher education, she should accumulate more academic resources, participate in more research projects, write and publish more articles.

(2). Everyone should have her career plan, which should be made early, and the earlier the better.

(3). It is better to accumulate academic resources before starting a family and having children, otherwise, there will not be enough time for your own research.

(4). It does not matter to delay the graduation. The most important thing is to find a good platform and a good job. As *Feng* said,

*'So if you are a Doctorate student, you'd rather have one more year to write a better article or more articles. I think you can postpone the graduation, publish more, and then find a better university.'*

‘所以博士的话，宁愿你多一年时间能发更好的文章或者更多的文章，你我觉得可以延期，可以去发更多的成果，然后去找一个更好的学校。’

*Zheng* shared the same view:

*'I think it's better to choose the kind of school that has an advantage in promoting career advancement... for example, from your current research level, and your degree, if it takes a long time for you to have a chance to get promoted, I think it is better to pick a place where you have more room for your promotion and to display your talents'.*

‘我觉得还是觉得要对自己的职业晋升有优势的那种学校...比如说从你现在的科研水平来说，还有就是你的学位学历来说，如果要很长时间，你才能够有晋升的机会的话，我觉得不妨挑一个你有更大的自己的晋升空间和更大的施展自己才华的空间去我觉得更好。’

(5). Find her own interests, take the work seriously, and always care about teaching and students.

*Qian* and *Chu* emphasised the need to find one's own interests and to take the work seriously.

*Wei* added,

*'First of all, you should have a full understanding of the career you are engaged in and know what kind of sense of achievement it will bring to you. But you also have to tolerate the bad things in it'.*

‘首先要对自己所从事的这份职业要进行一个充分的了解，要了解到他会给你带来哪些成就感，但是你也要必须包容他里边的哪些不好的地方。’

(6). Find ways to balance the work and family life reasonably.

As *Wei* pointed out,

*‘...for women, energy distribution is a very big test. This is a grand topic for females, which I will learn by accompanying my child growing up’.*

‘...所以这一点如果是作为女性来说，也是一个宏大的课题，会陪着孩子的成长当中去得到。’

*Han* added,

*‘...all women will encounter a dilemma in coordinating their work and family in all jobs. I think every female teacher must face this topic and choice’.*

‘就是所有的女性遇到所有的工作都会遇到的一个困境。然后协调好自己的工作和家庭，我觉得是我们每一个成家立业的女老师都必须要面对的一个课题和选择。’

In addition, there were several thought-provoking words, which are excerpted here. *Chu* recommended that communication was important in interpersonal relationships:

*‘One more, I think, is to communicate more. This is really a strategy, that is, to communicate more and go outside and have a look’.*

‘我想，还有一个就是多交流。这其实是一种策略，就是多交流，走出去看看。’

Persistence was a very important and valuable quality in a person's career. *Jiang* liked long distance running, and her suggestion for young female academics was:

*‘...you have to keep a peaceful mind and running, you have to keep running, running persistently’.*

‘你要保持一个平和的心态在那跑，但是你要不停的跑不停的跑，执着的跑。’

*Shen* mentioned a few essential qualities to be a teacher, which were valuable no matter what profession a person engaged in:

*'I think humility and open-mindedness are particularly important for a person, especially for a woman, and diligence, if there are three, I think it is possible to achieve one's own goals in life'.*

‘我觉得谦逊和豁达对于一个人，特别对于一位女性特别重要，再加上勤奋，如果有这三者的话，我想你想要达成自己的人生目标是可以的。’

## 5.8. Summary

Based on the questionnaire and interviews with the research participants, this chapter has discussed the quantitative and qualitative results of the current study. Following the order of five research questions, this chapter discusses the career trajectory of these mid-career academic women and how their career choices were inspired or influenced and then discusses their understanding and practice of career planning. It further summarises the obstacles or barriers that may exist in the mid-career women's promotion in the participants' eyes. Compared with the relevant literature findings, there are some noticeable overlaps between the current study and previous studies in this field, especially in women's multiple roles and responsibilities in the workplace and the lack of female role models at the leadership level. These comparisons will be discussed in the next chapter. Several mid-career academic women did have clear career plans, and they also lacked the relevant knowledge and the training. However, some interesting new findings that have not been noted in previous research, such as the over-emphasising on publications, have become one of the most influential factors for female scholars to arrange their career plan and a key criterion in their promotion. Unexpectedly, this research failed to identify a systematic strategy that the mid-career academic women adopted when they encountered any difficulties in seeking promotion. The specific findings of this study will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter (Chapter Six).

## **Chapter Six. Discussion**

### **6.1. Introduction**

This chapter synthesises and discusses the findings of this study (as presented in Chapter 5) in order to relate them to the key points mentioned in the literature review (see Chapter 3), which include the theoretical framework that is based on gender theory, women and leadership theory, as well as the concept of prestige and the research economy. The underpinning rationale and research paradigm and the research design have been outlined in the methodology (see Chapter 4). There were 391 participants in the survey and 16 interviews were conducted with mid-career academic women in HEIs in China. Chapter 5 has presented the findings of the two stages of the study to answer the main research questions:

What strategies do mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to further their career?

And answer the following research sub-questions (RQ):

RQ1. How do the mid-career academic women in higher education describe and construct their academic career trajectories?

RQ2. What personal and professional motivators influence the career choices mid-career academic women in higher education make?

RQ3. How do the mid-career academic women in higher education describe their current career aspirations?

RQ4. What are the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership experienced by mid-career academic women?

RQ5. What strategies, if any, do the mid-career academic women in higher education adopt to overcome barriers and pursue career opportunities?

From the research question and sub-questions, it can be clearly seen that the purpose of this study is to explore how academic women in the mid-career leadership of Chinese higher

education break through the bottleneck of career promotion and pursue higher leadership titles. Previous research has explored the internal and external barriers that hinder their career path, and confirmed the difficulties existing in promoting female leaders are genuine. However, studies have not identified what systematic strategies they adopted to overcome the obstacles.

The findings relating to these questions highlight five important issues for the discussion on the promotion of the mid-career academic women in Chinese higher education. The first issue concerns the access threshold of university teachers and the mid-career academic women's personal feelings and evaluation of the working environment (section 6.2). The second issue focuses on the factors and motivations that affect the academic women's career choices and their attachment to their current jobs (section 6.3). Next, the third issue concerns these academic women's understanding of their current career, including their career planning, career stage division and observation of other academic women (section 6.4). In regard to the fourth issue, the internal and external barriers to senior leadership in the mid-career academic women's current position are addressed, along with discussion on the research economy and work-life balance derived from the barriers (section 6.5). Finally, the promotion intention of the mid-career academic women is summarised, and the strategies to overcome the barriers are discussed (section 6.6).

## **6.2. RQ1: How Do the Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Describe and Construct Their Academic Career Trajectories?**

The main purpose of this research question was to explore the mid-career academic women's experiences and perceptions of their academic career trajectories so far in higher education in China. Their responses to this research question were generally similar and positive. Two themes were explored in relation to research sub-question one. The first was the career experience of female leaders in Chinese higher education; the findings showed that their

promotion process from starting work to the present mid-career leadership positions went well. The second theme arose from their understanding of this profession and their angle of narrating their career trajectories. The qualitative data showed that the interviewees tended to integrate their life track and career development concurrently. Each of the themes is discussed in turn in the following subsections.

### **6.2.1. Career Experience**

The evidence collected for this study has shown that the overall evaluation of mid-career academic women's career experience was similar and positive. It was reported in the qualitative findings that around the year 2003, the minimum threshold for entering a university job was a Bachelor's degree. The employment environment in the early years was welcoming to these women in this research, so their promotion progression went well in the last decade or so. For example, *Zhao* held a Bachelor's degree and she was close to retirement, and her professional title was a Professor and she had been a Dean since 2007; other interviewees, *Wu*, and *Wei*, had Master's degrees and started work in universities after graduation, and they had been Associate Professors for many years.

However, the threshold qualifications for entering academic positions in universities in China gradually increased over the years. In recent years, it is generally accepted that only Doctor's degree holders are eligible to apply for the teaching posts, while graduate students (MA holders) are only eligible to apply for the administrative posts. The qualitative findings also suggested that the interviewees generally felt it challenging for them to be further promoted despite years of hard work to reach middle-level leadership positions. This is the opposite of their previous career experience. Lack of sufficient education and academic background could be a barrier to the mid-career academic women's further promotion.

These findings on the entering threshold and the feelings of career experience broadly support the work of other studies on this topic. For example, Jiang's (2011) research pointed out that among the university teachers, the educational backgrounds of university teachers in different year groups were varied. Among the senior age group, most of them were undergraduates and MA holders, while only over ten per cent of them had a Doctor's degree. Although the proportion of young teachers with a Doctoral degree has increased significantly in recent years, the senior age group remained basically unchanged (Tang & Horta, 2021). The significant difference in the educational level of teachers in higher education was not in line with the international standards. Additionally, the threshold of entering university work has been gradually rising with the development of China's higher education, and the competition among teachers in universities is becoming increasingly fierce. This trend is also in line with Tang and Horta's systematic literature review from a historical perspective to analyse the expectations and challenges faced by women academics in Chinese higher education (Tang & Horta, 2021).

This finding is also in line with Huang's (2015) research on the academic career development of female university teachers in China, which reported that from 2000 to 2012, the proportion of female teachers' education improvement increased rapidly in just ten years, among which the proportion of PhD holders rose from 15% to 33.4%. Many flagship universities stipulated that except for arts and sports majors, one must have a Doctorate degree in the promotion to Associate Professor or above titles. The overall improvement of teachers' academic level leads to the improved promotion requirements, and a senior leadership position requires more academic achievements and a lot of time and energy. This group of mid-career academic women may find it difficult to reach a higher leadership position.

One possible explanation for this finding could be the frequent flow of the highly educated graduates with academic ability in the world. The mobility of highly educated talents nowadays is more transparent and faster, intensifying competition for better employment

resources. In the developed regions in China, the competition of higher education teachers would get more and more fierce. Due to the differences in regional economic development and the unequal distribution of educational resources, colleges and universities in developed areas have higher requirements for the recruitment of teachers (Tang & Horta, 2021; Xu, 2021). Thus, these mid-career academic women who entered higher education in the early years, although they successfully reached the middle-level leadership positions, their academic background is relatively weak compared with the present academic research talents.

The second explanation for this finding is that the ongoing academic employment reform introduces a competition mechanism into higher education to break the previous seniority and egalitarianism rationales for academic promotion (Zhang, 2015). Thus, the competition within the university is becoming increasingly fierce. This fierce competition is reflected in the requirements for the university teachers' research tasks and the competition for senior positions (Li & Shen, 2020). Because the competition for talents and academic resources was not so fierce in years before, the mid-career academic women who entered higher education in the early years enjoyed the favour of the overall academic job market at that time; however, such a friendly academic environment no longer exists.

### **6.2.2. Integration of Life and Career**

The second key issue arising from the findings for sub-question one is that the mid-career academic women tended to integrate their life track and career trajectory together. Two interesting findings emerged in the qualitative research. The first is the mid-career academic women in higher education describe their career development from the perspective of a teacher, not a leader, and the observed difference between the East and the West globally in terms of defining a leader or leadership. The second is that they integrated their career

trajectories with important life stages, such as marriage, having children, the important entrance examinations for children, etc.

A possible explanation for this difference between the East and West has been offered by Bush and Haiyan (2000), who explained China's stable agricultural society and geographical location resulted in its culture and traditional values remaining unchanged for thousands of years, so it was deeply integrated into all aspects of Chinese life. Thus, the 'top-down' leadership is deeply rooted in people's minds and provides a moral and behavioural theory on ethical behaviour, social structure and interpersonal relationship. In addition, Lu and Smith (2020) noted that status and age are the core values of Confucianism; hierarchy is one of the salient features of China's and other Asian organisational environments. These ethics naturally extend to China's education and influenced the guidelines for the hierarchical education structure. Similarly, students should respect their teachers' authority; this is reflected in China's educational leadership, which is usually 'top-down', and followers should obey the leader.

Therefore, the word 'leader' was more linked with an official or political career in Chinese culture. As described by the interviewees, a leader was a real role model in all aspects of their characteristics; for example, the interviewee stated that the leaders should be excellent in 'morality, ability, diligence, achievement, and honesty'. One interviewee articulated that a true leader should be a spiritual model and code of conduct for all their followers. This ideal is the same as in Tang and Horta's research (2021), that the current expectation regarding women is that they must be equally successful in career and family life. Moreover, the interviewees generally believed that leaders enjoyed a high moral level and great responsibility. A leader needed to have personality, charm, better communication skills, have a macro view and a more forward-looking vision. These leadership qualities partly accord with the leadership theories in the western context, which emphasised that leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals (Northouse, 2013). The

perfection of a leader or leadership makes it deviate from the leadership theory in this study, which extended the previous findings of the difference between the East and the West in terms of defining a leader or leadership.

One interesting finding in this research is that when the interviewees narrated their career trajectory, they integrated it with important life stages. Some interviewees even gave priority to their children's important learning stages in their plans. For example, if the child were about to face a key entrance examination, the female teacher would postpone her own study or promotion plan. This finding confirms the results of previous studies, such as Jiang (2011), He (2014), as well as Li and Shen's research (2020). These studies in the context of China's higher education have found that female teachers tend to put their family life and plans ahead of their career plans.

A possible explanation for this might be that for these academic women, pursuing an academic career happens at almost the same time as the period of childbearing (Li & Shen, 2020). The female university teachers should reconcile the dilemmas of being professional women and housewives and balancing them. Their life and work are inseparable and women's family responsibilities are still traditional and demanding, which leads to the need to consider family factors in the career trajectory. This finding also supports the evidence that academic women are deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture and that the most important duty of women is to educate their children and take care of the family (Feng, 2020; Yu et al., 2017). However, the findings are also comparable to international studies which show that academic mothers juggle multiple responsibilities and experience anxiety and exhaustion because of this. For example, the academic women in the USA are also struggling with issues around children and career, and fatigue and stress shape the daily lives (Acker & Armenti, 2004). For example, academic women in the USA are also struggling with issues around children and careers, and fatigue and stress shape their daily lives (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Female academics with parenting responsibilities in non-STEMM (science,

technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) sectors in Scotland and Australia are also exhausted and disadvantaged in the teaching and administration demands (Huppertz et al., 2019). Anxiety about motherhood and parenting was also found in Huopalainen and Satama's (2019) study, which was conducted in Finland.

### **6.3. RQ2: What Personal and Professional Motivators Influence the Career Choices Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Make?**

The main purpose of this sub-question is to understand the mid-career academic women's motivation for their career choice and explore whether any external or internal factors influence their choices. The motivation and factors of choosing this occupation are likely to affect their understanding of this occupation, as well as influence their career planning. The results of the qualitative findings revealed there are three themes in answering this question. The first one is the mid-career academic women's consideration of career choice. The second theme concerns the important people or experience that influenced their career choice. The third theme is the discussion on their attitudes towards changing jobs. The following parts discuss these three themes in turn, with possible explanations being highlighted.

#### **6.3.1. Career Choices**

The responses from the mid-career academic women in higher education revealed that their career choices had been deeply influenced by the traditional culture and the social environment (Yu et al., 2017). A common theme that emerged regarding the personal and professional motivators that influenced their choices was gender stereotypes. The most prominent finding was that they generally believed that being a higher education teacher was considered one of the best jobs for women. They believed that the relatively flexible work schedule enables the academic female to have more time and energy to take care of their family.

These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous work in the career choice of young teachers in China (Huang, 2015; Huang, 2018; Jiang, 2011; Liu, 2017), which concluded that there are four aspects that attract young college teachers: a relatively flexible work schedule; a stable work environment; social recognition and the realisation of self-value. Because the age when female university teachers begin to work corresponds to an important stage of their life, such as getting married and having children, they need to consider both family and career before choosing.

This finding also confirmed the previous research that historically, the societal expectation that women ought to be ‘good wives and mothers’ did not encourage them to go out and start their own careers (Tan & Gao, 2015). Lu and Smith’s (2020) research suggested that nursing, teaching and writing are considered to be in line with women’s characteristics, and these disciplines have become the traditional and popular ‘women’s field’.

A possible explanation for this could be that although the new trend of thought has replaced the old concept in modern society, some historic traditions are still retained due to the ideas being deeply rooted in Chinese people’s minds. It is difficult for a woman who was born and grew in this culture not to accept the transmission of consciousness from the outside world. This also accords with the discussion in the literature review (see section 2.4.1.) that heading toward the path of an official career and rising in the official world have long been seen as men’s jobs from the traditional view. It is hard to eliminate the thought that men should work outside while women take care of the home inside, even in modern society.

Another important reason for this career choice was that the interviewees reckoned that a mother was viewed as an essential role in the process of raising children, so a mother who was a teacher was considered to be able to educate her children better. Especially after years of studying and working in higher education, these women understand the significance of

children's early education, so they are more willing to spend more time and energy on cultivating their children (Li & Shen, 2020). It could also be inferred that it is more important for many Chinese women to educate their children than their career achievements.

### **6.3.2. Lack of Female Role Models**

It is interesting to note that in all 16 interviews, no interviewee mentioned a particular woman when they talked about their career role models. When describing teachers' influence on themselves in their study life, several interviewees mentioned that there was a specific teacher but did not specify whether they were male or female. No matter whether in the interviewees' study or work, they all expressed that they seldom met female leaders or superiors, so they generally did not have a female role model that could be learnt. The lack of a female role model, academic resources, and careers guidance may likely have reduced these interviewees' expectations for leadership positions. This may discourage academic women's ambitions and influence their advancement in leadership. Prior studies in Chinese higher education have noted the lack of role models and careers guidance in the female teachers' career path; the same situation was also found in this study that it is difficult for a woman to adapt to a high-level leadership circle full of men (Li, 2017; Liu, 2017).

This finding is consistent with that of Bagilhole and White's (2013) research into the cross-cultural analysis of the differences in career trajectories and experiences within a younger group of women academics, that it was notable that women generally have fewer role models of the same gender to identify with, which could lead to them feeling like an outsider in the organisation. The lack of women not only affects decision-making in the leadership for women who are committed to promotion, but they also do not have a female role model to learn from or a spiritual mentor to guide them. As discussed in the literature review, leadership has been generally equated with masculinity traditionally (see section 3.3.2.); the managerial jobs have been defined as a matter of instrumentality, autonomy, and result-

orientation, which are not particularly much in line with what is broadly assumed to be typical for females (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000). If the rule that men account for the dominating proportion of senior leaders cannot be broken, it will significantly impact the promotion of the younger generation of women.

A possible explanation for this might be that the modern higher education system was not fully established in China until the reform and opening-up policy in 1989, since when women's situation in higher education in China has made significant progress. In the early years, the proportion of women participating in higher education and working in higher education was less than that of men. This inequality in gender is gradually alleviating with the increase of women's participation in higher education. Thus, from the respondents' experience in the early years, female role models would be relatively minor.

Additionally, as mentioned in the literature review, there are fewer female leaders in higher education. Wang et al. (2014) reported that the number of senior female leaders in higher education is small with more deputy positions, more party leadership. This also accords with Wang and Yu's (2014) analysis that there are insufficient female leaders in higher education institutions in China. On the premise of a small number of female leaders, the probability of meeting a female role model who can serve as a role model is bound to be very low (Liu, 2017). Thus, this could offer an explanation for why it was difficult for the participants to meet a role model.

### **6.3.3. 'Bound' to the Job**

What is surprising is the interviewees' attitudes towards changing jobs. The interviewees generally had a resistant mood and an unconfident attitude towards the job change. These academic women seemed to be 'tied' or 'bound' to their current job. They generally showed that although they were very familiar and comfortable with the education environment, they

were not confident to enter other industries. Some of them indicated that changing jobs would mean that their current mode of life might be changed, followed by the possibility that the cost of changing jobs would be greater than the contemporary stable life.

This is an original finding that has hardly been mentioned in previous literature. There are two possible explanations for this unexpected finding. The first is that based on the traditional views, the interviewees may have a bias against other industries. The sense of occupational division of 'scholars, farmers, workers, and merchants' was the kernel structure of traditional Chinese society, in which the people engaged in business have always been seen as at the bottom of the social class (Hua, 2021). This could explain why the interviewees in this study who work in the education industry may be biased against people who are in business or work in companies. They may have a certain degree of prejudice or misunderstanding about other industries and believed that companies or enterprises only pursue economic benefits and revenue. Some interviewees reckoned that enterprises' working environment was not suitable for their career development and showed resistance and antipathy toward the corporate culture. The interviewees who held this opinion expressed that they would rather stay in a simple and not intriguing environment, such as the higher education institutions, which is a familiar environment where they felt they belonged, not in the enterprises or companies.

Another possible explanation is that all the interviewees entered the education industry directly after graduation. They may have very limited knowledge about other jobs or other industries, and most of them said that they had never thought of engaging in other professions before engaging in the education industry. This unfamiliarity with other fields and a long time in their own comfort zone would bring them some biased ideas about other jobs. They are in a stable period of career; changing jobs and moving to a new environment could make them feel insecure. As mentioned in the previous description of their career trajectory (see section 6.2.1.) and combined with the related literature on academic women's

career in China (Feng, 2020; Liu, 2017), these mid-career academic women in higher education tended to consider the important stages of their life together with their career, so changing jobs would undoubtedly have a significant impact on their family and their overall planning. Considering they have family responsibilities (Li & Shen, 2020), it was tough for them to make such a choice. These possibilities may help to understand why these academic women seemed to be ‘tied’ or ‘bound’ to the current job and unwilling to change jobs.

#### **6.4. RQ3: How Do the Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Describe Their Current Career Aspirations?**

This research sub-question is the critical link between the preceding and the following sub-questions. By exploring the mid-career academic women’s willingness for promotion, and whether they expected to be promoted or not, the key barriers that hinder the promotion were found. These barriers are discussed in sections 6.4.1. and 6.4.2. In this section, there are three important themes: the mid-career academic women’s understanding and practice of career planning, the division and interpretation of career stages, and their observation of women around them in terms of career planning and ambition.

##### **6.4.1. Career Plans**

Both the qualitative and quantitative findings have addressed this sub-question. The qualitative findings showed that there were three types of answers on evaluation of their career planning among the interviewees: clear, unclear, and between the two, showing an ambiguous attitude. Those who showed ambiguity or diverting the topic might indicate their uncertainty about their plans and avoid setting clear goals. This ambiguity was also found in the interviewees’ planning for the near future. There were two categories of career plans among them; one was the promotion, and the other was the plan for further education. The academic plan was still closely related to the promotion. In addition to the work plan, most

of them had plans to balance family and work better. However, some interviewees said that everything was up to fate, and they chose to follow destiny.

The quantitative results indicated that some of the respondents had specific plans for their future, but relatively few people were extremely confident in their plans, and few had no plans. The qualitative and quantitative findings have confirmed the review of the previous studies that higher education institutions and teachers paid less attention to planning and designing a career in China (Huang, 2015; Huang, 2018; Jiang, 2011). The studies of professional values and career planning are both scarce in terms of theoretical insight and in practice. One contribution of this research is that a large number of female teachers' attitudes towards career planning were obtained in the questionnaire, and the interviews further promoted the exploration. Comparing these findings with those of other studies confirms the general ambiguity in career planning among the young and mid-career teachers in colleges and universities in China (Huang, 2015).

There are two possible explanations for this ambiguity on career planning. One is that the awareness of self-development was not strong among this group of women, and they were not very clear about their own academic development goals and current academic status. They were also unaware of their own career capital and how to leverage this, as well as lacking knowledge of how to accrue career capital. In many cases, they developed passively with the changes of the external environment. As such, these interviewees lacked awareness of career planning, and they did not receive appropriate professional training in career planning, a finding shared with other research (Feng, 2020; Li, 2017; Liu, 2017). Thus, their understanding of career planning was very limited, so it was difficult for them to have a complete and clear career plan.

The second possible reason is that academic women tend to underestimate their academic ability. Some women have a weak sense of competition in academic development, lack

confidence in self-development, and put themselves in a subordinate position in teaching and research. Besides, other research has found that many academic women have significant changes of focus before and after marriage (Li & Shen, 2020). Their focus on the career in the past would shift to family and husband and to choose a more relaxed life, which weakens the career pursuit (Feng, 2020).

One interesting finding not previously reported was that most interviewees mentioned that one's personality and habits could affect their career planning. People who often set goals tended to have the habit of planning, whilst people who were more casual in their daily lives may make more instant reactions according to what happens, or leaving it to destiny or fate, as some of the interviewees mentioned. This viewpoint has very rarely been mentioned in the previous literature and it is a new finding in this research, so that future research could explore the planning and achievements of people's academic career from the perspective of their personality and the ability of self-planning.

In respect of the quantitative research, there were two key findings. One is that most of the survey participants believed that they had a relatively clear career plan, but the women with higher academic titles were more cautious about answering the question. The survey results also indicated that women in administrative posts were clearer about planning their career than Professors and Associate Professors. The second key finding is that by analysing the demographic factors of the academic women, their age was not significantly related to how they responded to most survey questions regarding the promotion of women.

However, different levels of education impacted their career planning and the influence of pregnancy was identified (as discussed in 5.2.1). These findings are consistent with the conclusion of the reference research (Xie & Zhu, 2016), which concluded that highly educated women had higher expectations of being promoted into more senior positions, but the reality was that there were limited senior positions available in the organisations.

However, Xie and Zhu's (2016) research was conducted in the business sector; this study has extended the findings in the educational context and indicated that highly educated women in senior leadership positions shared almost the same concerns in business contexts and the higher education sector.

This result may be explained by the fact that the women with higher academic title were more cautious about answering the question, and these women could easily be disappointed by the lack of senior positions and/or missing out on opportunities. In contrast, women in administrative posts with relatively lower educational background could be more realistic towards promotion; a middle-level management position could be good enough for them. This may also be supported by the fact that the nature of the work content and their different understanding of the work. The academic women with higher academic title clearly know what stage they are in, what criteria they need to be promoted, and how to evaluate their academic abilities and position themselves. Therefore, they have a more sober and calm expectation of their future career, and they are relatively less optimistic than those in administrative positions.

Regarding the relationship between how long the academic women have worked in higher education and whether their career planning was clear, both the quantitative and qualitative findings showed no clear correlation between them. This result corroborates the findings of a great deal of the previous work in the studies on understanding the stages of teachers' career in Chinese higher education (Du, 2019). Such teachers generally do not have a comprehensive understanding of teachers' career planning and lack relevant theoretical knowledge (Feng, 2020; Li, 2017).

In summary, both the quantitative and qualitative findings have confirmed the review of the previous studies that higher education institutions and teachers have hardly paid attention to planning and designing a career in China (Huang, 2015; Huang, 2018; Jiang, 2011). This

study has provided solid evidence on this topic, because some Chinese scholars have noticed the research gap in this area; many articles in the journals tend to provide general solutions (Li, 2017; Dai et al., 2018; Fan, 2020), which were in the form of appeals, and few could provide specific and practical measures. This research has made a little contribution on it and more comprehensive research studies in terms of theoretical insight and in practice are urgently needed.

#### **6.4.2. Career Stages**

One unexpected qualitative finding was that there was no consistency in the division of career development stages among the interviewees. They generally described their experience according to the years of working, and no one described the stages strictly based on age; their division was more inclined to reflect personal experience. The interviewees' answers varied in the extent to which they reported their division of the career stages. Moreover, they tended to integrate their career stages with their life cycle, which has been discussed in section 6.2.2.

In China, research on female university teachers' career division has not been found so far, and this study seeks to fill this gap. Unfortunately, this study has been unable to demonstrate and conclude the interviewees' answers on the divisions of career stages because the interviewees did not report a consistent division of career stages. Also, the current findings do not support the previous theories on career stages, such as Super's (1980) theory discussed in section 4.6., which divided the career stage based on age. The only similar point is that when describing their different career stages, they tended to note important events as the dividing line, such as getting a degree, changing jobs, marriage, or having children.

A possible explanation for this result may be the lack of adequate vocational training before and after starting this job. The mid-career academic women knew little about their career,

and their workplaces (universities) do not provide corresponding support. This explanation is related to the above theme on career planning (see section 6.4.1.). The lack of knowledge of career planning may possibly lead to their vague expressions on dividing career stages.

Another important explanation noted previously in section 4.6., is that when considering the statutory retirement age in China (55 years old for women) and the fact that PhD graduates may start their career from around 30 years old, it is hard to define a clear career stage division and match with other countries. In addition, some interviewees (for example, *Feng*) had other prior work experience at the University, adding to the difficulty of assigning them to a career stage.

#### **6.4.3. Other Females' Career Aspiration**

The interviewees' observations on their female colleagues could provide a comparatively objective perspective on the mid-to-senior level women in higher education in China. From the qualitative findings, while most of the interviewees recognised that many female colleagues actively strive for the promotion, they also implied that some would go with the flow. According to the interviewees, although most female teachers were not interested in the promotion of administrative positions, the value of professional titles was recognised by most people.

This finding supported the previous research findings that there is a conflict between the ideal and reality in the social status of university teachers in China (He, 2014). In this study, the author elaborated on the professional dilemma of university teachers. On the one hand, a university teacher is a decent and respectable profession. On the other hand, the income of university teachers is relatively low compared with some other occupations in the whole society. Although the university's welfare is guaranteed, the salary level of teachers is not proportional to their investment, especially for teachers of Humanities and Social Sciences; the research funding is limited as well.

This result may be explained by the fact that most teachers believed that getting a higher professional title was a proof of one's overall academic ability and could bring extra benefits in terms of economic and academic resources. The higher education teachers enjoy a higher social status, but with the transformation of the social economy, teachers' professional attractiveness is also changing because teachers' income is relatively low. These teachers could achieve their income and welfare growth and reputation enhancement through promotion. This also explains to a certain extent that even if their academic ability is limited and their enthusiasm for learning is not high, these women still have to strive to promote professional titles. Thus, from a career capital perspective the women demonstrate a sense of purpose to envisage a successful career in terms of 'knowing why' but do not appear to have the motivational energy needed to convert this to career capital (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994), that is valued in the contemporary prestige research economy of the career field (Kandiko et al., (2018).

Another possible explanation for this is that this willingness to seek promotion mainly depended on one's personality and characteristics, as well as individual family income status and living conditions. Some female teachers may come from a relatively wealthy family background, so they are satisfied with their current work and life status. In addition, some of them may have developed a habit of being content with the status quo in higher education and not willing to jump out of their comfort zone. This might be another factor that hinders their way to a higher professional or administrative level.

## **6.5. RQ4: What Are the Perceived Barriers and Challenges to Senior Leadership Experienced by Mid-Career Academic Women?**

The initial objective of this research was to explore factors affecting women's careers in universities in China, specifically, the opportunities and barriers, both internal and external, present in women's professional career paths. Based on the discussion to the previous sub-

question (section 6.3), the expectation of promotion is common among these academic women. However, multiple barriers, both internal and external, have hindered the way of promotion. This section focuses on the factors identified in this study, and their responses to this part of the investigation gave rise to three important themes: gender and culture, research economy and work-life balance.

Prior studies have noted the importance of identifying the barriers that academic women were facing in organisations. Tomas (2010) distinguished the barriers from the external environment and internal characteristics. The research studies in the Chinese higher education sector divided these barriers into three categories, which are working pressure (the pressure of teaching, scientific research and the pressure of being assessed for promotion), life pressure (such as housing, marriage and parenting, etc.) and other personal pressure (such as the pressure of self-health and pressure of career planning, etc.) (Shao et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020). As set out in section 2.5.3., the discussion in this section will relate the external and internal barriers mentioned in the literature review with the findings in this study and followed by the three themes.

### **6.5.1. The External Barriers**

As discussed in the literature review (see section 3.6.), the supposed external barriers are employment policy, promotion criteria, research atmosphere, gender bias and masculine culture in the Chinese HEIs. Among all these barriers, the employment policy was rarely mentioned among the interviewees, and no one thought there was anything inappropriate about the current policy regarding the promotion mechanism. The research atmosphere was hardly mentioned in the interviews, but most interviewees' concerns were in the link between publication and the research economy. They all expressed their concern that publishing is increasingly becoming the most critical tool to measure a scholar's achievements. The previous findings of gender-based inequalities did not explicitly emerge

in this study. The interviewees generally believed that the current competitive environment was relatively fair and open, so they felt that competition in such an atmosphere was guaranteed and reliable.

The interviewees generally believed that the problem was not the policies or regulations, but the concept of inequality between men and women in people's subconscious and in traditional Chinese culture. As in one interviewee's classic narration, 'women represent the past, while men represent the future'. She believed that people usually tend to give men higher expectations and thought men could be entrusted with important tasks and have better development in their careers. However, women were promoted only because of their past achievements. Most of the interviewees believed that in a family, people subconsciously thought that men's career development was more important than women's, and it was women who often made sacrifices on the career.

This finding has reinforced Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt's (2001) views that gender-based inequalities exist in the exercise of administrative functions in assessing women, and gender stereotyping seems to play a crucial role in assessing a woman's competence and performance in her management position. The previous research studies have also highlighted the dilemmas that women stuck in their multiple roles and conflicting responsibilities experience (Ropers-Huilman, 2008). This finding also accords with some research studies conducted in China's higher education in recent years. For example, Shao et al. (2020) and Zhao et al. (2020) summarised the characteristics of the full-time professional teachers in higher education; the pressure from the external environment included the pressure of teaching, scientific research and professional title assessment, which are all promotion criteria.

One unanticipated finding was the value of publications is part of the metrication of higher education as mentioned by interviewees. Although there were five external factors proposed before the research, it was unexpected that the participants in this study talked more about

the promotion criteria than other possible barriers. The discussion on the promotion criteria leads to the thinking of the research economy. One of the important conditions for promotion is one's academic achievements, which equals publications in this context. The excessive pursuit of immediate research benefits in the academic environment could lead to the birth of an academic-industrial chain, where every academia in this industrial chain is both a producer and a consumer. Thus, the publication and research economy will be discussed later (see section 6.4.4.).

A possible explanation for the findings that most of the answers were related to the promotion criteria may be that the system of academic title evaluation is heavily reliant on academic achievements (Xu, 2021). With the continuous growth of capable academic talents, the standard of evaluation and promotion has not been designed and regulated according to the development of the research field or the characteristics of different disciplines. However, it adopts the unified standard of 'publication only', which means using published articles as the only standard to judge a person's academic level—this resulting in much chaos in publishing and also bringing great pressure on these academic women (Li & Shen, 2020).

### **6.5.2. The Internal Barriers**

The internal barriers in this research were identified in the literature review (see section 3.6.), which included the following possibilities: lack of confidence or experience, lack of time or energy, the stereotypes of female, the cultural impact, self-background (skills, knowledge, qualifications, experiences), personal characteristics, domestic issues, and the dual burden. There were mutual influences and interdependence between them. For example, some interviewees believed that the main reason they were not confident about the promotion was their limitation on academic ability (lack of relevant knowledge and qualifications). In addition, the stereotypes of female and the cultural impact were frequently mentioned in the

interviewees' career choice and career plan, as well as in the following discussion. The above internal factors were mentioned by the interviewees to varying degrees.

These findings on the internal factors confirm some previous studies, such as Shan's (2017) research on the living conditions of young university teachers in China, which listed three types of barriers for them. The first was social factors, the second was the university factors, and the third was the young teachers' personal factors. Beyond this study, these internal factors are also recognised and mentioned in the wider literature in Chinese context (Huang, 2015; Shao et al., 2020).

There are some possible explanations for these internal factors, which can be generally found in research studies. First, among the internal factors, the teachers' own values and academic ability are closely related to themselves. Academic ability is essential for women in the mid-career stage, but it is also challenging for them. As mentioned in the RQ3 career stage, women would usually integrate their life and career planning together; they shoulder the responsibility for work, family and society, and they all have multiple roles. In this period, they are prone to job burnout, confusion and even loss of enthusiasm. With the development of information technology, the speed of knowledge updating is accelerated, the knowledge updating cycle is shortened, and teachers are supposed to have higher requirements for knowledge reserve. Therefore, as teachers who have been working in universities for a period of time, the mid-career academic women need to keep pace with the times and adopt the latest and enrich teaching and research methods (Li & Shen, 2020). However, it takes a lot of energy and time, which invisibly increased a lot of pressure for these women, readily causing bottlenecks in their career.

One unanticipated finding from the quantitative results was that higher education degrees and the attitude of senior leaders towards promoting women proved less significant compared with previous research. This is a significant and original contribution of this

research. In comparison, the previous studies (Aaltio & Huang, 2007; Cooke, 2005), which were done more than ten years ago, emphasised the importance of the inter-personal relationships, connections and *Guanxi* (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). In the current study, outstanding work capability and rich work experience were the most important criteria towards promoting women, followed by good relations with senior leaders, colleagues and fellow employees. These female leaders believed that outstanding work capabilities and excellent achievements were the most important basis upon which women would be promoted. Besides, one interviewee, *Yang*, indicated that a woman should be extraordinarily outstanding in both work and family to compete for the promotion to a higher level. Interestingly, neither having a higher educational degree nor senior leaders' emphasis on women's promotion in the organisation was perceived as a major factor for a woman being promoted, and these findings differ from previous research (Cooke, 2005).

One possible explanation for this different finding in quantitative research is that the previous research on related fields was carried out earlier, and the studies by Cooke (2005), and Aaltio and Huang (2007) go back more than ten years. Since then, China's higher education has developed rapidly, and the number of women participating in postgraduate education has increased, and more women have entered universities to teach after obtaining Doctoral degrees. With the increase of international exchanges, more and more university teachers could obtain the latest research outcomes from foreign research institutions. Many of the female scholars have the chance to visit and communicate at an international standard, so the competition among teachers is becoming increasingly fierce. As mentioned earlier (section 6.2.1.), the current threshold of entering university work is at least a postgraduate degree. Therefore, this threshold also stimulates the overall academic environment in Chinese higher education. In a platform where everyone has a high level of academic ability, people will pay more attention to their academic ability and the competitive environment has possibly become fairer.

### 6.5.3. Gender and Culture

In this research, the interviewees generally agreed on two views concerning gender and promotion in their current higher education working environment. First, the current gender composition of the leadership in the university was more males than females, and the higher the level, the lower the proportion of females. Second, with the increase of working years, men's advantage in leadership was obviously strengthened.

Although gender and leadership in Chinese culture were not explicitly mentioned in the interviews, it was easy to see the influence of traditional culture on these women in terms of men's work and economic positioning, as well as men's responsibilities in the family. These influences were deeply rooted in everyone's mind. Even though these interviewees received higher education, many of them having obtained PhD degrees, under the influence of culture and social environment, they still thought that men are responsible for the outside and women care about the domestic. Similar evidence could be found in the survey result that men should be stronger than women and should protect women (see section 5.2.).

This finding of the influence of traditional culture is consistent with that of Powell (1999), who identified that the 'glass ceiling' was still invisible and concreted in that it prevents women from their progress up the organisational ladder. It also supports the findings from the prior studies that although higher education institutions have always been considered to be good places of implementing equal rights for men and women, women have often found themselves in the 'velvet ghettos' of communication, finance and human resource management or languishing in the 'ivory basement' (Eveline, 2004; Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Morley, 2012).

A possible explanation for these results may be that the culture and social expectations are deeply rooted in these women's minds. As discussed in section 2.5.3., organisations have been built upon the expectations and aspirations of men historically, so women in senior leadership positions typically need strong social networks within and outside their workplace

to succeed. In contrast to women, men automatically benefit from the ‘old boy networks’ (Lyness & Thompson, 2000). Although social networks were not cited as a major barrier for women in this study, these are known to be more difficult for women to access and to be accepted into, resulting in women being disadvantaged in terms of ‘knowing whom’ career capital which is derived from social networks. Added to this, women in this study would give up some social contacts and career development opportunities because of the responsibility they took for their families.

In accordance with the qualitative findings, the quantitative results have demonstrated the same finding. The overall picture of women being promoted into middle managerial positions level is indicative that there has been positive improvement, with the majority of women scholars being satisfied with the proportion of women as leaders and their own promotion situation in their current institution. However, the majority of these women in mid-career were still at relatively lower or middle positions compared with their male counterparts. This situation is similar to other universities around the world, such as Malaysia (Morley, 2017), in Hong Kong HE (Aiston & Yang, 2017), and in the UK and European context (Morley, 2018). It is also similar to the business field, such as in the USA, where many women are in management, but they tend to be clustered in lower managerial ranks with only a few at top executive levels (Jones, 2005; Xie & Zhu, 2016).

Moreover, the results from the quantitative research indicated that these women leaders were quite pessimistic regarding the influence of pregnancy on their current positions and further promotion opportunities. This is not all together surprising as international research indicate that pregnancy and early motherhood puts women at a disadvantage achieving to research and publication outputs necessary for promotion. For instance, Acker and Armenti’s (2004) research in the USA found that the academic women were working harder and sleeping less, which might be considered somewhat short of empowering. In the UK, Epifanio and Troeger (2019) observed that the generosity of maternity leaves across universities varies greatly, and they contribute to the debate on women’s under-representation in qualified and

competitive sectors and encourage maternity and child-caring across UK higher education institutions. Huppertz and her colleagues' research focused on 35 non-STEMM academics in Scotland and Australia, and found that in the neoliberal university contexts, there are tensions between organisational policies (such as maternity leave and flexible work) and the contemporary demands of academic labour (Huppertz et al., 2019).

The majority of mid-career academic women believed that pregnancy would have some influence on their current leadership position and further promotions; only a few believed that there would be no influence at all. The Doctorate graduates generally thought pregnancy is more likely to have an impact on their position and promotion opportunities than the Bachelor's degree and Master's degree holders. This finding is consistent with the reference research from Xie and Zhu (2016) mentioned in section 6.4.1. and Li and Shen's (2020) research that highly educated women have a clearer understanding of their career and a more accurate positioning of themselves, so they could clearly recognise the obstacles or barriers to their career. While women with relatively lower degrees are clearer about the positions they want to be promoted to and have stronger intentions, their goals are relatively low, and a middle-level management position could be good enough for them.

A possible explanation for these results may be that highly educated women spend more time and energy on studying and academic research. At present, the minimum standard for university teaching is a Doctor's degree. Usually, women achieve PhD degrees at around 30 years old, which is the same age as traditionally when they should get married and have children (Xu, 2021). Especially in the early stage of entering the workplace, women would think more about whether to sacrifice their career development to parenting. At present, in Chinese society, the responsibility of raising children mainly depends on women, and the protection measures for women in the workplace to raise their children are not well-designed, so it leads to the dilemma of career development and raising children for these academic

women (Li & Shen, 2020). Therefore, the highly educated academic women generally thought pregnancy is more likely to have an impact on their position and promotion opportunities. If they need to choose between their career development and family responsibility, women will tend to take family responsibility rather than develop their own career as shown in the data, where the vast majority of respondents said their children's education is more important than their own career development.

#### **6.5.4. Prestige and Research Economy**

One unanticipated finding is that standards of academic achievement, as measured by research and publication outputs was a source of worry that occupied the time of mid-career academic women in this study. As mentioned in the literature review, previous studies, especially those in UK higher education, indicate that the sector is over-reliant on performance measurement. Critiques argue that this has a negative impact on the environment and culture of these institutions (Fletcher et al., 2007). In Chinese higher education, the measurement standard for achievement and promotion among academic staff mainly relied on two criteria: first, performance appraisal standards relating to their current position (discussed in section 5.6.2.) and the other aspect was the corresponding requirement to publish in order to achieve a higher level of professional title.

These findings in this study correspond to research in the UK and other European countries, indicating that Higher Education Institutions in China are driven by in the same way by the prestige and research economy. As Morley (2018) pointed out, the financialisation of research has given rise to attention being given to research quality and productivity. Research is now conceptualised as income-generation, associated as it is with commercialisation, utility, knowledge mobilisation and impact, and performance management. She also argued that scholars are now forced to consider their teaching and research as some marketable commodities in these marketised and corporatised universities.

Encouraging the HE institutions to be research-focused and teaching-oriented is viewed as a good way to attract talents and to stimulate the existing internal environment. However, the findings of this research indicate that too much emphasis has been put on the publications, turning the research culture into a productivity culture.

One additional possible explanation for the over-reliant on the number of academic works or publications is related to the rapid development of postgraduate education. According to the Statistical Bulletin on The Development of National Education in 2020 published by the Ministry of education in China, there were over 466 thousand enrolled doctoral students in China, including 66200 doctorate graduates in 2020 (MOE, 2021). This is merely the number of doctoral graduates in China mainland, there is currently no reliable statistical data indicating the number of overseas doctoral graduates returning to China. As stated in 2.5.2., there were 2,956 ordinary and adult colleges and universities in China in 2019 (MOE, 2020). With this large number of PhD holders graduating every year, colleges and universities have become increasingly unable to meet their needs. As employers, HEIs can only raise the threshold for the job seekers and raise the requirements for teachers correspondingly in dealing with the intense competition. Specifically, doctoral graduates need at least one core journal article to compete for the limited postdoctoral positions in some HEIs. For the lecturers, they need more core journal articles and higher-level projects to succeed gaining the associate professor title.

This study supports evidence from previous observations from Kandiko et al., (2018) that what ‘counts’ in higher education in terms of academic careers has become more and more tied to metrics and indicators. As Ball (2012) argued: ‘neoliberalism is ‘in here’ as well as ‘out there’ and ‘a certain imagination of the ‘market’ as a basis for the universalisation of market-based social relations penetrate in almost every single aspect of our lives’ (Ball, 2012, p.18). The reform of Higher Education is an economic and business dynamic which seeks profit from the buying and selling of education services. The benchmark for a successful

academic career is consequently linked to more publications and more research grants, meaning that productivity targets dominate the time of staff.

Findings from this research indicate that women suffer from anxiety relating to research. Some interviewees expressed concern about the quality of their publications. The evaluation criteria of higher education institutions is closely linked to both standard of a publication and the number of publications produced, resulting in low quality overall for some participants. To respond to the pressure to produce large numbers of publications, one interviewee (*Wang*) who was also an editor, pointed out that many book authors were re-editing and copying each other. Despite the fact that these publications are not making an original contribution to knowledge, she complained that the authors still meet the number of publications required by standards for promotion. While this could not be verified in the present study and is outside of its scope, findings from this study indicate that the prestige economy may have a negative impact on the academic environment. As exemplified in Blackmore and Kandiko's model of academic motivation (see section 3.4.4.), the academic community interact with individual scholar's prestige and academic resources. The negative impact on the academic environment (for example, the excessive focus on publications and the potential risks of poor publication quality) can consequently have a negative impact on the individual and the overall academic environment.

Based on Blackmore and Kandiko's model of academic motivation and the findings in this research, an extended model of academic motivation is illustrated later in this chapter (see section 6.7.). First, attention is given to career capital as a possible explanation for the a disadvantageous position the women appeared to hold in the highly competitive field of higher education.

### **6.5.5. Career Capital**

With the development of personal careers, the mid-career academic women's interactions with the academic environment and experts have created abundant career capital resources. This interaction could lead to a constantly changing but still recognisable and partially stable capital portfolio, which individuals used to achieve personal goals as career capital. Drawing on the interview findings, the following three themes emerged associated with the three dimensions of career capital: knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom.

#### ***Knowing Why***

The mid-career academic women had good insight into their motivation for working in academia, but this was mainly linked to family priorities and their desire for a career that is prestigious and viewed as a promising, socially acceptable career for a woman. This finding is in line with the previous research on the inherent impression of women's choice of career that female graduates prefer to choose a work environment that is more family-friendly and beneficial to the growth of the next generation (White et al., 2011; Chinajob, 2018). It also confirmed the traditionally thought that university teacher is regarded as a decent and idle job for women (Li & Shen, 2020). Although some interviewees have career goals, they failed to identify the important aspect of work that would enable them to progress in their career, namely academic publishing. They knew they should be publishing but were unclear about their values regarding publishing (other than needing to do it for promotion) or able to identify closely with this aspect of the job. This finding was different from the research by Kandiko et al. (2018), which found that the mid-career women understood the importance of status and knew the 'rules of the game', but they were critical of these rules and reluctant to pursue prestige overtly. However, there is a lack of related research and extensive cognition in career capital among Chinese women, and there is no current data to be compared in this field.

#### ***Knowing How***

The interviewees lacked skills and knowledge of how to produce high-quality academic publications and lacked support or know-how to develop the ability to meet the productivity demands of the job. Especially those who had been in academia for a long time, struggled to adapt to the changing nature of the role. This is mainly due to a lack of career planning knowledge and the generally recognising university teacher as decent job (Li & Shen, 2020). These women in this research chose this career with very limited information and the inherent impression, but they were struggling with adapting to the ever-changing academic atmosphere. Moreover, some interviewees have certain prejudices and misunderstandings about other industries, one interviewee (*Sun*) expressed that the business environment is full of mutual suspicion and deception, while the academic environment is simple and pure. They would like to concentrate on their teaching and academic research in a non-commercial environment. This view could prevent them from realising their career capital and manipulating capital to help their career development.

### ***Knowing Whom***

In terms of the bonding ties to colleagues and mentors and bridging ties to acquaintances, the interviewees seldom described their relationship with them. Only a few interviewees mentioned their close interaction with colleagues in the same research group or the same age. The colleagues in the same department would help each other in teaching and student assessment, and they would exchange some information related to their current work. However, no one mentioned they had a close connection with other departments, other universities, or the relevant publishing industry. Only one teacher, *Wang*, mentioned she had friends in the publishing industry and her experience as a journal editor. The interviewees generally lacked abundant social networks to support them with career development and lacked role models. Some interviewees were aware of the importance of networks and connections but still appeared unable to develop relationships that could help them in their career. The importance of interpersonal relationships was discussed by Deem (2003), which was regarded as an essential factor in work and promotion in leadership positions. However,

according to the result of the participants' self-assessment on their competency of handling the current job and their career development opportunities in the questionnaire (see section 5.2.), the participants generally believed that the most important abilities are personal work and academic ability, rather than rely on good interpersonal relationships. This is further recognition of personal academic and workability, but adversely, this would cause the neglect of the connection building among the scholars in this field.

Overall, it can be concluded from the interview findings that there is a general neglect and lack of knowledge of career capital among academic women in Chinese universities. Although career capital has not been discussed in the field of higher education in China, the previous studies on university teachers' careers and development indicate that academic women in Chinese universities are generally unclear about their career plans and have no promotion strategy (Liu, 2017; Fan, 2020; Feng, 2020). This study confirms these findings and associates this phenomenon career capital.

There are a number of possible reasons why career capital is not well understood by female academics. Fan's (2020) research suggested that these teachers' teaching and research work takes up a lot of time, leaving women with little time to consider their career. Spending a lot of time working leaves little time for professional development and may stagnate a person's career or prevent them from updating their professional skills. Another possible explanation is that some universities provide very limited research resources, which makes it hard to achieve research goals. This is likely to gradually weaken the motivation to achieve research and publication goals. In this circumstance is not surprising that motivational energy and self-perception associated with 'knowing-why' career capital may be low, and made worse by lack of the second type of career capital, 'knowing-how' in the form of opportunities for job-related learning relating to research. This also has relevance to research that women may not be able to obtain higher-level positions because they lack the strategic understanding and experience usually obtained from line management or strategic roles early in their careers

(Fan, 2020; Jayashree et al., 2021). Moreover, the women in this study did not have an awareness of accumulating career capital in their early career experience. One other possible explanation for these academic women in Chinese universities being unable to obtain higher-level positions may be the lack of ‘knowing whom’ career capital in the form of social networks, nor did they receive adequate guidance on their careers.

While women’s careers in higher education in China have not previously examined through the lens of career capital, certainly the findings from this study align with prior research and point to multiple barriers to career capital accrual (Eagly and Heilman, 2016; Jayashree et al., 2021) for women in the field of Higher Education in China.

Important implications arise from these findings since, as discussed in section 3.4.3., a person’s trajectory and initial experience of the field could impact the development of one’s habitus. This research suggests that the lack of earlier exposure to relevant career experience did not prepare the mid-career academic women for the neoliberal academic context in today’s Chinese higher education. A possible explanation for this is that the nature of the academic field in China is constantly changing. The field is occupied by the prominent members who define the implicit rules, which are considered to be valuable capital in the field. The ‘rules’ and ‘values’ of capital often reflect the vision and habits of the dominant groups. There is an institutional hierarchy in this field according to the participants’ perceived valuable capital, so the participants with low capital value are often at a disadvantage position in this field. In this study, the structure of a male-dominated leadership environment makes having specific abilities (such as career capital) considered valuable for leadership positions. In addition, such a capital creation environment often replicates and strengthens the dominant group (men), thus attracting those who embody similar capital (other men) and excluding those who do not embody similar capital (women) (Jayashree et al., 2021). Not only were they lacking in academic capital and the three ways of knowing, but they also had not fully developed the habitus of that field.

### 6.5.6. Work-Life Balance

It is not a new discovery that women need to reconcile the dilemmas of professional women and housewives in their whole career. One interviewee (*Chen*) even gave an example that she and her husband went to study for the PhD degree in the same year, but she should take care of the two children only by herself. Because the nature of her job was similar to her husband's and they were in the same department, when there was a chance of promotion, her husband had the priority to be promoted. This example reflects that people still have a certain degree of agreement with the traditional concept of 'male is in charge of earning money to support the family, while the female is responsible for doing housework' (Zhao & Jones, 2017). It was generally agreed among the interviewees that a good female leader not only needed to be excellent in her work but also needed to be an extremely competent mother.

The findings of this study in terms of work-life balance and conflicting responsibilities were similar and consistent with the findings in the previous studies. Multiple roles, especially the roles in a family, and conflicting responsibilities have restricted female leadership promotion rates (Li, 2018; West, 2014). This finding broadly supports previous studies, which generally hold the view that female leaders have to make more difficult choices than males, and their conflicting responsibilities hinder the progress of their promotion seriously (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009; Tomas et al., 2010; Zhao& Jones, 2017).

Scholars discussing this issue argue that men tend to be able to concentrate on their job without thinking of domestic issues, whereas a woman leader should take care of both the career and family, as well as balance the role of a mother and a leader (Feng, 2020; Liu, 2017). This accords with findings relating to RQ3 that indicate women integrate career decisions with family decisions when considering their career goals. This self-restraint is most likely to have originated from tradition and the expectation of women's role in the

social value system, but is unlikely to change unless women are highly regarded for achieving success in both the family and career domain.

## **6.6. RQ5: What Strategies, If Any, Do the Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Adopt To Overcome Barriers and Pursue Career Opportunities?**

### **6.6.1. The Promotion Intention**

From the survey and interviews analysis, the mid-career academic women in higher education have a generally positive attitude towards their future career. The quantitative results indicated that most participants felt they were at least matched with their current position and those who felt they have more potential had the expectations to be promoted. The survey results also suggested that most academic women in their mid-career stage have confidence in future plans. In the qualitative findings, a small number of interviewees stayed in the same position due to internal or external reasons, but most of them were always preparing for possible promotion opportunities. Thus, both the participants' intention in the survey and the interviewees' intention for promotion were strong.

However, because of the internal and external factors previously analysed in research sub-question four (section 6.4.), it is hard for mid-career academic women to go further in the leadership position. To solve this problem or overcome these barriers is to rely on personal efforts, support from the school level, and the policy and government level. Therefore, it can be assumed that some approaches from these three levels should be taken to solve these problems. Combined with the previous domestic-related research (Huang, 2015; Shan, 2017; Shao et al., 2020), the first approach is that at the social level, it should be creating a social atmosphere of respecting teachers and emphasising teaching; the government should formulate relevant policies to protect teachers' rights and interests to be more assured in their teaching and scientific research. The second approach is from the higher education institution level; it is suggested that the institution should improve the post-performance

salary system and ensure the economic income of the higher education teachers. The teacher training system should be improved as well, which consists not only of career planning training but also professional training. The third approach is related to the higher education teacher's self-planning; on the one hand, it is essential to establish the values of lifelong learning and do a good job planning for themselves. On the other hand, they should establish a good relationship with colleagues and predecessors and learn from them, and they should adjust their negative emotions effectively.

### **6.6.2. Strategies**

Unfortunately, this study has been unable to demonstrate any systematic strategy adopted by the mid-career academic women in higher education to overcome barriers and pursue career opportunities. It could be summarised from the interviewees' responses that the so-called strategy can only be regarded as in the Chinese saying, 'when the flood approaches, bank up to keep it out', which means there will always be a correct way to deal with an opponent or a problem. These academic women did not thrive to reach the high standard initially by themselves but tried to find a way to solve the current problems. Although no systematic strategy could be concluded, there were some commonly used measures that could help the academic women when needed. The first one is investing in self-education and learning. The interviewees participated in various types of training to enhance their all-round skills, and some would find opportunities to go to foreign universities for further study or academic visits. The second is working hard; it was stressed by the most interviewees that diligence and the pursuit of excellence are the most important qualities to gain credibility and legitimacy in the workplace and are the key factor for promotion. The third one is seeking family support, which is a distinguishing feature in Chinese culture, and has been discussed in Chapter Five (see section 5.6.4.2.).

Comparison of the findings with those of other studies confirms that the mid-career academic women in higher education do not have a systematic strategy to overcome barriers and pursue career opportunities. For example, Huang (2015) believed that female university teachers' cognition of their own academic career development was not enough. On the one hand, academic women's awareness and intention of self-development were not strong. On the other hand, female university teachers' assessment of their own academic ability development is relatively low, which puts them in a disadvantageous position in academic career development. This could also lead to gender segregation in academic career development, which is reflected in the fact that women are more concentrated in teaching than in research, and in some subjects, the ratio of male and female teachers was seriously unbalanced. The findings in this research suggested that gender segregation also affected the income of male and female teachers; the income of some female researchers was at a low level. Besides, universities will give prizes and other material rewards to teachers with outstanding scientific research achievements, which was one of the main reasons for the low income of female teachers who have limited time and energy in research.

These findings also corroborate the results of a great deal of the previous work on the mid-career academic women's career obstacles in the Chinese context (Huang, 2015; Li, 2017; Wang, 2016). Previous studies have not mentioned how these female teachers use their own strategies to overcome the barriers (Huang, 2015). Instead, prior studies gave suggestions based on the research findings and the author's perspective. For example, they suggested that female teachers should be encouraged to enhance their awareness of self-development and raise their expectations for their career. They recommended that female teachers make career planning and expand their academic resources to expand academic influence (Huang, 2015; Wang, 2016). It is a pity that some scholars have found that the barriers existed for a long time, and such an appeal has been made for many years, but it is not very easy to take real action.

A possible explanation for this finding might be the Chinese people generally pursue more group interests or collectivism in their culture, which is different from the individualism pursued in the West. There are not many people willing to make themselves different from others; they prefer to go the way most people are going and choose the choice of most people. Some interviewees called this way of dealing with things as ‘following the general trend’ or ‘going with the flow or stream’, which was also a manifestation of this cultural tradition. Hide the individual in the groups and work together for the collective interests. Thus, there is a Chinese saying, ‘do one’s best and leave the rest to God’s will’; this attitude is commonly seen in Chinese society.

In this study, no matter whether the participants had plans for the future, whether they were successful or unsuccessful in promotion, these interviewees had a relatively calm attitude towards the outcomes and the current situation. The results of many things were determined by a variety of intricate and intertwined factors. A person could only do what they tried to do, and the rest was beyond their control, so they chose not to dwell too much on the outcome. Everyone’s life and career experiences were different, and it was not surprising that they did not give systematic strategies. Instead, they gave their philosophy of living, which was ‘go with the flow or stream’.

### **6.6.3. Interviewees’ Suggestions**

Although these interviewees may not have systematically considered their career planning, their advice to young women was mainly concentrated on career planning and life planning. The suggestions from these interviewees may be based on their own failure experience or regret. Most of the suggestions were related to the coordination between family issues and work. There were also some suggestions about setting up a healthy professional outlook and treating the career with a positive attitude in one’s whole life. This kind of career suggestions from the interviewees has not been found in the current Chinese literature and in Chinese

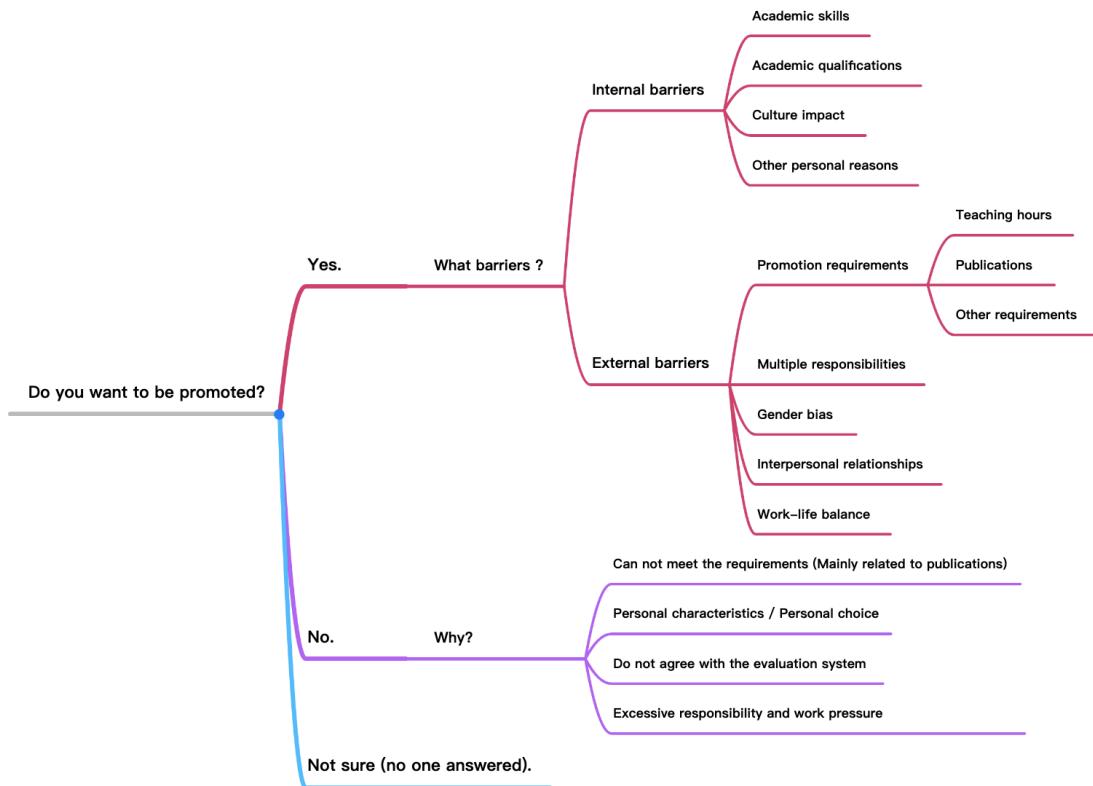
context, while the vast majority of the literature is based on the author's summary of general suggestions, such as encourage the teachers to seek further study, learn self-regulation and alleviate the pressures; The society, government departments and universities should provide policy support, emotional support for the teachers (Dai, 2018; Shao et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2020).

This finding is consistent with the previous research sub-question findings that these women have a limited knowledge career plan and do not have systematically coping strategies in the promotion (Tang & Horta, 2021; Xu, 2021). Due to the lack of this knowledge, when asked about their suggestion to the promising female teachers, they could only give some broad advice through their own experience. This is an important issue for future research. Attention should be drawn to the career plan and professional training.

## **6.7. Theorising the Barriers to Senior Leadership in Chinese HE**

Before this research, the barriers of mid-career academic women in HEIs were proposed by concluding the outcomes from the previous research studies, which have been illustrated in section 3.4.4 (see Figure 3.1.). The current study contributes to asking the mid-career academic women in higher education in China, 'do you want to be promoted?'. Figure 6.1 provides a summary of the participants' answers based on this research. As it shows, there are three types of the answers, which are positive, negative, and uncertain. The respondents who answered yes talked about the internal and external factors, while the interviewees who provided the negative answer also gave their reasons. It is worth noting that most of the reasons for those who did not want to be promoted came from external factors, such as disagreeing with the current evaluation system and believing that the responsibilities and work pressure were unbearable.

**Figure 6.1. The Answers to 'Do You Want To Be Promoted?'**



## 6.8. Extended model of academic motivation

The study contributes to further understanding of Blackmore and Kandiko's model of academic motivation to explain the mid-career academic women's current dilemma. The model below is from the literature review (see Chapter Three, 3.4.4. *The model of academic motivation*) which integrates together three key aspects of academic motivation: an intrinsic interest in pursuing academic work; financial and other tangible benefits; and prestige rewards. The model depicts the ways in which monetary and prestige economies interact with each other and with academic work and the broader academic context. It draws on psychological theories of motivation and socio-cultural ideas in the form of communities, identities and roles (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011, p.405).

**Figure 6.2.** A model of academic motivation (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011, p.405).

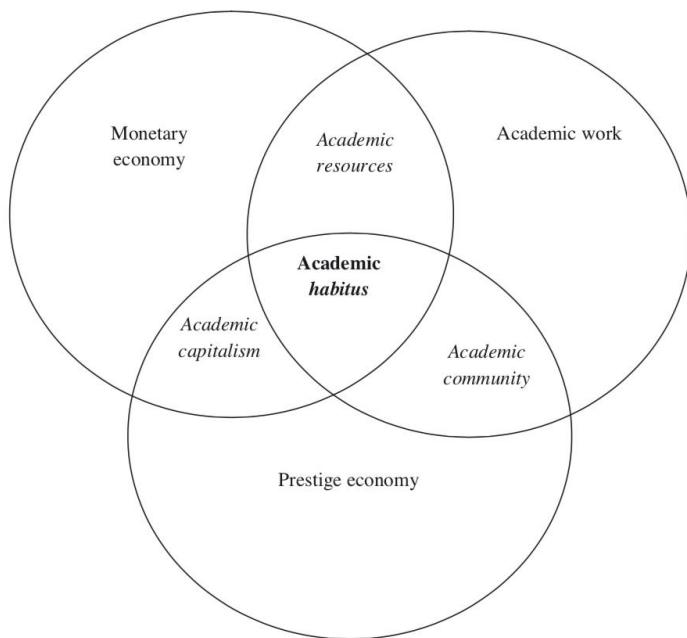
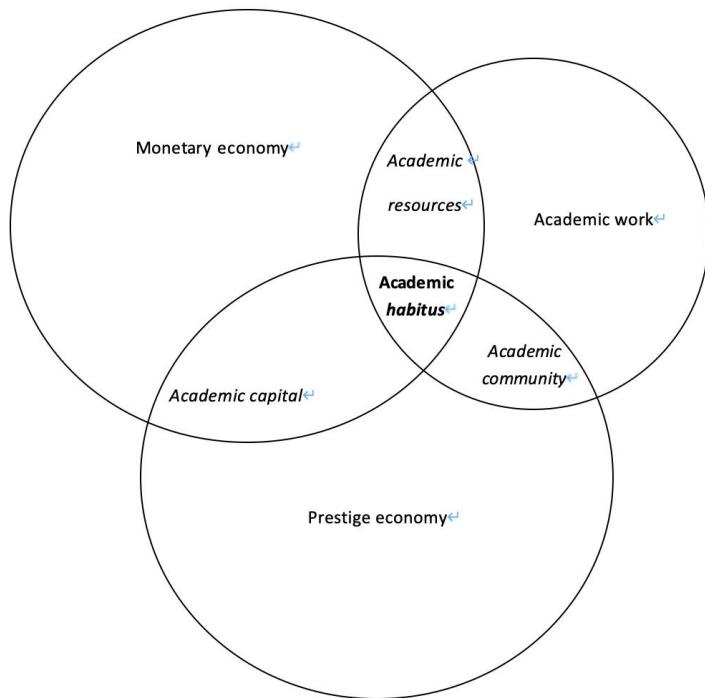


Figure 1. A model of academic motivation.

According to Blackmore and Kandiko's theory, the academic habitus is at the centre of the diagram, where all three areas intersect. The three areas in this diagram are maintained in a state of balance between individual and environmental norms. Inevitably, considering these motivation domains, the academic habitus is always in tension. Especially in this study, various factors make these academic women need to manage conflicting roles to meet their own and other expectations. Those who succeed in academic work are those who can work effectively in these tensions and balance the three domains.

In the context of this research, the focus of the study is the circle in the upper right corner, which is the 'academic work' that refers to both the outcomes of work (the books, articles, patents and so on) and the process of working. Based on the investigation of these mid-career academic women from the findings, their academic contributions are limited, which resulted that the circle representing academic work is very small, so the situation is as in the follow picture Figure 6.3.:

**Figure 6.3.** A model of academic motivation based on this research



As is shown in the figure 6.3., due to the lack of '*Academic work*' which refers the publications in this study, this circle has shrunk. The intersection between academic work and the prestige economy relates to the idea of the academic community – where there are strong traditions of collegiality and the free availability of knowledge. It is worth noting that the transition from single author creativity to knowledge production team will further enhance the importance of academic reputation in reward, and the shrinking of this area would reduce such prospects. The overlap between the monetary economy and the prestige economy is the domain of academic capitalism-where applied research takes place, undertaken by those who feel either more or less comfortable working in this zone. Thus, if the circle of a scholar's academic work shrinks, it means he or she is giving away this part of academic capital to other competitors. There is an area of tension and negotiation between academic work and the monetary economy. All academic work needs academic resources, so reducing this area will significantly affect a scholar's research. Eventually, the *Academic habitus* area in the centre is squeezed to a minimal size, which means the balance between

individual and environmental norms was not achieve and leads to an unpleasant *Academic habitus*.

As discussed in 6.5.4., with the marketisation and corporation of the universities in China, higher education is to some degree over-reliant on performance measurement, which has an impact on the academic environment and culture. For the mid-career academic women in Chinese HEIs in this study, their ‘academic work’ (the books, articles, patents, projects and so on) is limited due to various reasons. Section 6.5.1. and 6.5.2 have discussed the external and internal barriers that these women encountered in their career trajectory and promotion progress, together with the traditional view on women’s family and caring responsibilities (see section 6.5.3.) and their busy work schedule, the interviewees generally expressed that ‘academic work’ is the biggest obstacle to their promotion. Based on this extended model of academic motivation (Figure 6.3), lack of ‘academic work’, meaning work that is valued in the prestige economy, is intrinsically interlinked with fewer academic resources in the academic field and in turn lack of influence in the academic community. The lack of these academic resources creates a vicious cycle of disadvantage in the academic field. As discussed earlier in this section, the academic habitus is always in tension. Failure to balance these three domains could lead to an unstable and uncomfortable academic habitus for the mid-career academic women in the Chinese HEIs. In such an unpleasant *Academic habitus*, the mid-career academic women may experience a downward spiral into unfavourable academic positions. This unfavourable and disadvantaged position in the academic field is likely be further detrimental to the mid-career academic women’s career development and promotion within the highly competitive neoliberal university.

## **6.9. Summary**

This chapter has discussed the quantitative and qualitative results of the current study, obtained from a questionnaire with 391 women working in mid-career level academic roles

in universities in China and 16 interviews with the research participants. This research has investigated how mid-career academic women in higher education in China further their career. In general, the results align partly with those of previous research, concerning the Chinese cultural background differing from the Western countries. The comparison of these findings with those reported in the relevant literature has been discussed in this chapter. There is some overlap between the current study and previous studies in this field, especially in the leadership and gender, leadership and culture, research economy and work-life balance. Some contradictory results were also found in this study, such as the academic women in higher education generally commented that the equality between men and women in the workplace is still very common. In terms of promotion, instead of interpersonal relationships, it was found outstanding work capabilities and excellent achievements were the most important basis upon which women would be promoted. There have been many conjectures about the obstacles to promotion in the literature review, which were divided into internal and external factors. However, in the interviews, the participants focused on the requirement for publications and extended the topic to the influence of the research economy. One of the original purposes of this research was to find out the strategies that the mid-career academic women in higher education adopt, if any, to overcome barriers and pursue career opportunities; it has revealed that there was little career strategising and certainly no systematic career planning among the participants.

## **Chapter Seven. Conclusion**

### **7.1. Introduction**

As the final chapter in this thesis, the current chapter summarises and concludes the study (section 7.2.), highlighting the key findings to the research questions (section 7.3.). Additionally, the study's original contribution to knowledge is explained (section 7.4), followed by the limitations of the conceptual framework and research design (see section 7.5.). Finally, recommendations for future research will be made (section 7.6).

### **7.2. Summary of the Study**

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, China has the largest higher education system in the world, with a significant number of female academic staff (Attane, 2012). In 2020, there were 1,833 million full-time teachers in colleges and universities across the country, around half of whom were female (MOE, 2020). However, the extant literature suggests that there are more women in middle-level leadership positions among women employed in higher education, and proportionally fewer women than men in senior leadership positions, especially in the role of University Principal (Wang et al., 2014). Consequently, most female academics in China become stuck around mid-career in the middle ranks of the profession (Tang & Horta, 2020; Xu, 2021). Research studies have emerged concerning the career path of female leadership in recent years, but most of those studies concentrate on enterprises and institutions in the field of public administration (Hu, 2009; Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2016). Although there were research studies that focused on the professional dilemma of higher education teachers, most of these were based on qualitative research or used library-based data. Moreover, the promotion of middle-level female leaders to senior-level leadership in higher education has rarely been considered in the literature.

The Contextualising Chapter (Chapter 2) has outlined the important aspects of women's status and women's leadership in higher education in China. The scale and information concerning female teachers in HEIs are presented to provide an overview of the quantity of higher education in China. In addition, the unique historical and cultural context in China is also addressed in this chapter to illustrate its profound impact on every aspect of the gender issue.

Informed by a detailed review of relevant literature in Chapter 3, the conceptual framework for this study can be summarised as encompassing four concepts: gender, women's leadership, the research economy and career capital. The review of the literature helped to inform the research questions formulated for this study, which are concerned with women's career trajectories, personal and professional motivators influencing their career, their career aspirations, the barriers and opportunities they experienced to career progression, and, finally, the strategies they deployed to further their career, if any. The intersection of gender and other roles in women's life was put at the centre of analysis, ensuring that this research is grounded in the experiences of women. The different interpretations of the concept of leadership in the Chinese context were discussed in this chapter. Leadership in the Chinese context means more than leading a group of people to achieve a common goal; it also stresses the ability to analyse and judge, to make decisions, coordinate and solve disputes, as well as having strong execution ability in practical work (Wang & Yue, 2014). It includes morality and diligence, which mean having a high moral character and a positive working attitude and dedication. These reasons have prompted the Chinese people to have different views on leadership and the responsibility of being a leader. Similarly, influenced by traditional thought, the social understanding of the university teachers' work was that it was very relaxed and they had many holidays, so they could take better care of their families. This is consistent with the traditional idea that 'men should work outside while women take care of the home inside' (Lu, 2010). This idea also prompted the young female PhD degree holders believed that they should strive to pursue this decent and stable job.

However, against the backdrop of globalisation, China's higher education reform is moving towards marketisation by learning from Western universities (Tang, 2014). With universities paying increasing attention to quantitative indicators, such as the number of published papers, the female scholars in their mid-career who hope to progress up the ranks of academia face fierce competition (Li & Shen, 2020; Xu, 2021). When these mid-career academic women in China entered universities in the early years, they were soon promoted to their current middle-level leadership positions through hard work. After years of rapid development of China's higher education, a large number of internationally competitive Doctoral graduates entered higher education to start working (Li & Shen, 2020). The mid-career academic women could keep their titles and work in the HE institutions until they retire, but their chances of promotion are limited (Dai, 2018; Shao et al., 2020). They should have been aware of the change of academic atmosphere towards marketisation and timely adjusted their career planning and strategies, but the research shows that women in the mid-careers were slow to respond to this trend.

The literature review also informed the development of the study's methodology and methods. Some scholars focused on the female university leaders at Chinese universities (Wang & Yu, 2014; Wang et al., 2014); other scholars conducted interviews and action research on female leadership in the educational field (Hu, 2009; Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2016; Zhong & Ehrich, 2010). The quantitative method was also adopted to investigate the structural model and scale development of women's career success (Xiao & Luo, 2015), and by using hypothesis testing, the effects of servant leadership on work-family balance was explored (Wang et al., 2016). However, many articles in the journals have tended to provide general solutions (Dai et al., 2018; Fan, 2020; Li, 2017), which were in the form of appeals, and few have provided large-scale surveys and mixed methods approaches. Thus, this study subsequently involved a survey of 391 female academics working in universities in China and semi-structured interviews with 16 females at the mid-career stage. This has provided

solid evidence on this topic and more comprehensive research in terms of theoretical insight and practice. In the following section, the findings of this research will be summarised.

### **7.3 Summary of the Findings**

The following section presents the summarised findings in respect of the five research questions, drawing on quantitative and qualitative findings, as appropriate. The first section begins with the answers to research question one (RQ1) based on findings from qualitative interviews with 16 women. It presents the mid-career academic women's experiences and perceptions of their academic career trajectories so far in higher education in China. The second section (RQ2) focuses on the factors and motivations that affect the academic women's career choices and their attachment to their current jobs. This finding was mainly based on the findings from the 16 interviews. The third section (RQ3) concerns these academic women's understanding of their career planning, career stage division and observation of other academic women, which comes from the findings of the questionnaire and interviews. The fourth section (RQ4) addresses the internal and external barriers to senior leadership in the mid-career academic women's current position, which was derived by comparing the previous literature and the current research. The last section (RQ5) discusses the possible strategies to overcome the barriers, which were based on the outcome of the whole research rather than only the oral statements of the interviewees.

#### **RQ1: How Do the Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Describe and Construct Their Academic Career Trajectories?**

The aim of this question was to explore the mid-career academic women's experiences and perceptions of their academic career trajectories so far in higher education in China.

Overall, this study found that the mid-career academic women in higher education generally experienced a relatively smooth progression in their career from when they started work to promotion to middle-level leadership positions. In their experience, as long as their educational background and work experience meet the corresponding required indicators, they can make progress in their position and take the leadership roles. Their narrative on the career trajectories integrate their life track and career development concurrently. Some interviewees even gave priority to their children's important learning stages in their plans. This finding confirms the results of previous studies (He, 2017; Jiang, 2011; Li & Shen, 2020), which have found that female teachers tend to put their family life and plans ahead of their career plans. This finding also supports the evidence that academic women are deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture and that the most important duty of women is to educate their children and take care of the family (Feng, 2020; Yu et al., 2017).

The difference between the East and the West in terms of defining a leader or leadership was also observed. The word 'leader' was more linked with an official or political career in Chinese culture and pursuing the official or political career has been regarded as men's responsibility since the ancient times. The interviewees stated that the leaders should be excellent in 'morality, ability, diligence, achievement, and honesty' and a true leader should be a spiritual model and code of conduct for all their followers. These characteristics were mostly associated with male leaders from the traditional view, which indicated the leadership stereotypes is commonly existed and leadership is defined according to normative masculinity (Binns & Kerfoot, 2011). This ideal is the same as in Tang and Horta's research (2021), that the current expectation regarding women is that they must be equally successful in career and family life. The extant literature suggests the notion of 'top-down' leadership deeply rooted in people's minds and provides a moral and behavioural theory on ethical behaviour, social structure and interpersonal relationships (Bush & Haiyan, 2000), and hierarchy is one of the salient features of China's and other Asian organisational environments, which has extended to China's education and influenced the guidelines for

the hierarchical education structure (Lu & Smith, 2020). The notion of ‘top-down’ leadership and hierarchy appeared to be essential factors influencing participants in this study.

## **RQ2: What Personal and Professional Motivators Influence the Career Choices Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Make?**

The main purpose of this question is to understand the mid-career academic women’s motivation for their career choice and explore whether any factors influence this choice at that time. Their responses revealed that their career choices had been deeply influenced by the traditional culture and the social environment (Yu et al., 2017). The most prominent finding was that they generally believed that being a higher education teacher was considered one of the best jobs for women, which allows them to spend more time and energy to take care of their family. These results corroborate the findings of the previous work in the career choice of the elder generations and the young female HE teachers in China (Huang, 2015; Huang, 2018; Jiang, 2011; Liu, 2017). Although these mid-career academic women have received years of higher education, and some of them have obtained Doctorate degrees and had overseas learning experience, the traditional culture still has a great influence on them. In addition, these academic women seemed to be ‘tied’ or ‘bound’ to their current job, which is an original finding that has never been mentioned in previous literature. They generally had a resistant mood and an unconfident attitude towards the job change, and generally showed that they were not confident to enter other industries. This thesis has provided a deeper insight into the influence of the traditional values remaining strong, that women choose academia as a prestigious profession that they view as fitting with family life, and they appear reluctant to change profession even if that could further their career.

One possible interpretation of this finding is that the lack of a female role model, academic resources, and careers guidance may have reduced the mid-career women’s expectations for

leadership positions and may discourage their ambitions in leadership (Li, 2017; Liu, 2017). Another possible explanation for this finding is that leadership has been generally equated with masculinity traditionally (Binns & Kerfoot, 2011; Sinclair, 2005); the managerial jobs have been defined as a matter of instrumentality, autonomy, and result-orientation, which are not particularly much in line with what is broadly assumed to be typical for females (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000). Another possible explanation given in previous research is that the shortage of female leaders in higher education institutions in China could lower the probability of meeting a female role model for the younger generation of women (Liu, 2017). This could also discourage the young female scholars' ambitions in leadership. This finding has reinforced the traditional value that women choose academia as a prestigious career that they think is suitable for family life and they appear reluctant to change profession.

### **RQ3: How Do the Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Describe Their Current Career Aspirations?**

This question aims to explore the mid-career academic women's ambitions for promotion and whether they expected to be promoted or not. Both qualitative and quantitative findings provide the answers, which have confirmed the review of the previous studies that higher education institutions and teachers paid little attention to planning and designing a career in China (Huang, 2015; Huang, 2018; Jiang, 2011). This study has also confirmed the general ambiguity in career planning among mid-career academic women in universities in China; some of the respondents had specific plans for their future, but relatively few were extremely confident in their plans, and some had no plans. This ambiguity was also found in the division of career development stages among the interviewees. Their way of dividing the career stages was more inclined to reflect personal experience rather than giving a clear division according to age.

The interviewees' observation of women around them in terms of career planning and ambition provided a comparatively objective overview. The interviewees recognised that many female colleagues were ambitious, but they also implied that a large number of female colleagues would go with the flow. This finding may be explained by the view that there is a conflict between the ideal and reality in the social status of university teachers in China (He, 2014). The university teacher is generally considered to be a decent job that enjoys a high reputation, while the income of university teachers is relatively low compared with some other occupations. Similar to the answer to RQ2, the traditional value made women believe that academia is a prestigious career that is suitable for family life. However, the limitations of one's academic ability and other factors could hinder their way to a higher leadership level. This contradiction has contributed to the differentiation trend in the attitude towards promotion (many female academia pursued career progress, while there were still a considerable number of women choose to stay in their current positions).

#### **RQ4: What Are the Perceived Barriers and Challenges to Senior Leadership Experienced by Mid-Career Academic Women?**

The initial objective of this research was to explore the internal and external factors affecting women's careers in universities in China. This study has identified the barriers in the Chinese higher education context. As discussed in the Discussion chapter (see section 6.4.1.), the external barriers are employment policy, promotion criteria, research atmosphere, gender bias and masculine culture in the HEIs. The internal barriers include the lack of confidence or experience, lack of time or energy, the stereotypes of female, the cultural impact, self-background (skills, knowledge, qualifications, experiences), personal characteristics, domestic issues, and the dual burden.

One unanticipated finding was that the value of publications is part of the indicator for promotion in higher education, as mentioned by interviewees. This finding raises discussion

about the research economy in the Chinese higher education context. It is not a new topic in the Western higher education context, and this study tried to integrate the mid-career academic women's worrying about publications with the research economy in Chinese higher education. The over-reliance on performance measurement, such as the publications and research grants, might lead to a competitive and results-oriented atmosphere within the HEIs (Fletcher et al., 2007). The academic women in this study are now facing the dilemma that they should consider their teaching and research as marketable commodities in this marketised higher education system (Morley, 2018). The financialisation of research is a double-edged sword: it encourages the HE institutions to be research-focused and teaching-oriented, which is a good way to attract talents and can also be used to stimulate the existing internal environment. On the other side, scholars are now forced to consider their teaching and research as some marketable commodities in these marketised and corporatised universities. This research also revealed that too much emphasis has been put on the publications, which made some of the mid-career academic women struggled with the publications and hindered their way to career improvement.

This research introduced the notion of Career capital, which is believed to be the first time this has been examined in research in the Chinese higher education context. The mid-career academic women's professional knowledge, skills and experience in work are their precious Career capital, and their interactions with the academic environment and experts have created abundant career capital resources. Unfortunately, findings from the qualitative study suggest female academics in China lack understanding of their Career capital and the three ways of knowing, and they also have not had a fully developed habitus of that field. Also, they lacked earlier exposure to relevant career experience, which did not prepare these women for the neoliberal academic context in today's Chinese higher education. They could have used their capital to better accrue benefits from their skills, experience and educational investment in order to get better returns to achieve personal goals. Since there is no relevant research in the context of Chinese education, these suggestions are exemplified in the

literature on career achievements in the Western context (Seibert et al., 2001) and in the business management in Chinese background (Yao, 2013). It is hoped these findings may enlighten women and future researchers to the concept of career capital. This concept is not widely used in the educational research and no research was found so far that discussed career capital theory in the Chinese higher education context.

#### **RQ5: What Strategies, If Any, Do the Mid-Career Academic Women in Higher Education Adopt To Overcome Barriers and Pursue Career Opportunities?**

The aim of this research question was to summarise the strategies that the academic women adopted to deal with the dilemma in their mid-career, according to the interviews. Although no interviewee in this study could provide a systematic strategy to overcome the barriers on their way to promotion, they contributed wisdom and countermeasures to deal with the obstacles individually. The empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of the strategies to overcome the barriers and pursue career opportunities. These female scholars were good at breaking down the encountered difficulties in their work and solving the problems through communication and seeking help. In the long run, they planned to take the initiative to seek self-improvement, such as looking for training or learning opportunities to prepare for the possible challenges in the future. If the difficulties come from daily life, such as the domestic issues and taking care of children, they would seek the help and support from their parents or elder relatives.

In order to achieve their career goals and aspirations, the mid-career academic women utilised diverse methods to overcome the barriers in their career path. Rather than strategies, it is more appropriate to regard these actions as ‘efforts’ or ‘coping measures’. The following four methods were concluded from the research findings.

(1). *Invest in self-education and learning.* Continuing to pursue further education and self-improvement, and having expanded career-related knowledge and skills, and even some people being ready to study abroad for further education or academic visit, is a way to prepare for senior leadership positions. The interviewees not only pursued progress in their field and obtained higher professional titles, but also took the initiative to participate in various types of professional training to enhance their all-round skills and work abilities. Some interviewees expressed that they would find opportunities to go to foreign universities for further study or visits to prepare for possible promotion opportunities in the future. Many interviewees may spend their spare time studying and improving their work skills because they realise that visible work performance could increase their chances of being selected and promoted. These women equipped with competency could effectively perform their job duties and enhance their legitimacy as leaders in their organisations.

(2). *Diligence and Working hard.* Most mid-career academic women regarded diligence and the pursuit of excellence as one of the most important qualities to gain credibility and legitimacy in the workplace and the key factor for promotion. In order to overcome the challenges they may encounter on the road to senior leadership, the women in this study expressed their willingness and commitment to work hard. In fact, as one respondent in this study mentioned, in order to prove their ability to work, women often work harder than their male counterparts. In addition to demonstrating their leadership ability, the participants generally believed that a good female leader should take good care of her family as well as be a good leader in the workplace.

(3). *Communicating with others.* Some interviewees would communicate with their colleagues or superiors to overcome the obstacles and relieve the pressures in the current work. They were all aware that creating an effective communication atmosphere was essential in the workplace, and to maintain a good relationship with colleagues were generally accepted, including their superiors and subordinates. They could maintain access

to extensive and practical information and make their working environment more comfortable. Communication with colleagues could promote exchanging information and connection, benefiting their cooperation. Good communication with their superiors could better complete and execute tasks more effectively. However, the communication is only limited to the information exchange on current work rather than academic resources in the broader community.

(4). *Seeking family support.* Although this method is not mentioned frequently by the participants, it is worth discussing because it reflects a unique aspect of Chinese culture. Traditionally, career development is considered beneficial to the whole family; the retired grandparents believe that they should help the younger generation with their lives and careers. Thus, it is common for the grandparents to help the younger generation take care of their children and do housework. The female leaders in this research could have more time and energy to focus on their work with the support from their parents, and they generally expressed their gratitude for the support from their families.

## **7.4 Original Contribution to knowledge**

This study has made the following contributions to knowledge:

- ☞ This research, which included a questionnaire with 391 female academics and semi-structured interviews with 16 mid-career academic females working in Higher Education Institutions in China, provides a robust sample from which new knowledge has been generated. First, the study contributes new theoretical knowledge to the theory and practice gap in women leadership in the Chinese higher education context. This research provides fresh insights into the internal and external barriers that present to their progression to senior leadership positions in higher education. It is believed to be the first attempt to explore academic women's career aspirations and the strategies they deploy to further their career.

- ☞ This research has tentatively made a first step towards understanding career capital in Chinese higher education context. Career capital is closely related to the mid-career academic women's career trajectories, and it is a commonly used term among researchers in the western context but not in the educational field in China. Thus, this study represents the first serious attempts to pay attention to academic women's awareness of career capital and may serve to stimulate a strand of research in the Chinese higher education context.
- ☞ This research is based on the previous research on Blackmore and Kandiko's (2011, p. 405) model of academic motivation to explain the mid-career academic women's current dilemma. Due to the lack of 'academic work', which refers to the publications in this study, the circle of a scholar's academic work shrinks, which leads to the Academic habitus area in the centre being squeezed to a minimal size (please refer section 6.7.). This means the balance between individual scholar and academic environmental norms was not achieved and leads to an unpleasant Academic habitus to the academic women. This finding indicates that the mid-career academic women in Chinese higher education should value their academic work and create a relatively relaxed environment to access more academic resources and a more comfortable Academic habitus.
- ☞ In terms of the research context, this study's findings could help academic women in Chinese higher education to plan career prospects and overcome possible difficulties in promotion in the future. Also, this research could help the younger generation of female scholars to have an overview of the academic career in higher education institutions. The possible strategies of resolving the mid-career dilemma are proposed (in RQ5 in section 7.3.), and implications for the leadership pipeline in China's universities are discussed (section 7.6.). This study also helps to prevent young female scholars from

engaging in occupations that are not suitable for them because of traditional cognition and blind pursuit of the so-called stable job in higher education.

## **7.5 Limitations of the Study**

First of all, one limitation is about the scope of the study and sampling. China is a large country, and there are great differences in economic development between the eastern and the western regions, so there are differences in the development of higher education in different areas. The interview process can also be clearly distinguished that teachers from different regions have different explanations and experiences to some extent. The pressure and challenges faced by the teachers with better higher education resources are different from those faced by teachers from remote areas with poor educational resources. The practical limitation is that it was not possible for one researcher to interview a larger sample. However, the 16 participants in the qualitative study and the 391 respondents to the questionnaire provide a good sample size. Moreover, there are insufficient previous studies with a Chinese background to identify the scope of works that have been done so far in the research area. The previous findings are often seen as the foundation for the researchers to build their own research and to achieve their research objectives, but it also can be treated as an opportunity to fill the research gap.

Second, because of the lack of a consistent definition of the mid-career stage in China, and the retirement time of Chinese women, which is much earlier than that in most other countries, the mid-career stage appears much earlier. This means that the mid-career stage findings may not easily correlate with those of other studies focusing on the mid-career stage. Also, the early entry level for many of these academic women was relatively low, so the barriers they face now due to lack of qualifications may not be the same as for women in future studies in China or other countries where the entry level is higher. However, this study

may contribute to other similar contexts in Asia and be beneficial to those countries whose higher education system is established late and still developing.

Third, during the interview, the discussion of publications and other academic performance indicators occupied much of the time. This leads to the fact that many efforts were made to explore the relationship between publications and the research economy and the personal experience of these teachers. There is a lack of discussion on other internal and external barriers in the interviews, which were proposed in the initial stage of this research. For instance, the deficiencies at the policy level and different rules and regulations have not been mentioned in the interviews, including the police in balancing the relationship between family and career in the workplace. There are also many internal and external obstacles mentioned in the literature review that have not been fully explored in this research, which are worth exploring in the future.

Fourth, career capital is an important theory underpinning this research, but due to the lack of relevant research in higher education in China, the participants were unfamiliar with this concept, so there is not much room for discussion about career capital in this study. Also, the initial stage of this research did not consider career capital, which results in less discussion of this concept. Thus, future research on career capital in China's higher education could be conducted from various angles and included more questions tailored to this concept and informed by the theory.

Fifth, the questionnaire lacked exploration of the participants' career strategies and aspirations and the participants' understanding of leaders and leadership. The lack of these explorations leads to the fact that when answering the five research questions, the results of the quantitative part could not provide corresponding answers to the first two research questions. Thus, future research could pay more attention to the design of the questionnaire

questions to further explore the participants' career strategies and aspirations and their perceptions of leadership in the broader population.

## **7.6. Implications for Practice**

### **7.6.1 Implications for Mid-career Academic Women**

In this study, these women in the middle of their careers were aware of the importance of improving their academic ability and related training in order to achieve career progression. Whether they receive training actively or passively, they are preparing for the future possible opportunities. Empirical evidence has affirmed that women who have achieved a higher level of education tend to have higher self-efficacy, which could help them with their career advancement (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). Participating in work-related training could enhance women's job capability, enable networking and legitimise their leadership in organisations (Wang & Shirmohammadi, 2016). Thus, keeping learning and making progress is what they need to consider and keep in mind at every stage of their career. Whether pursuing a higher degree or receiving relevant skills training is of great benefit to the future development of these women leaders.

The lack of a female role model or a female mentor may likely have reduced the mid-career academic women's expectations for leadership positions. This may also discourage academic women's ambitions and influence their advancement in leadership. The lack of female role models could not be improved in a short time, but young scholars could find guidance from the few female role models in various fields, such as in the politics and business context. The good news is that a large number of women with strong academic abilities have entered the field of higher education to work, and as more people pay attention to gender inequality in leadership positions, the number of female role models is bound to increase in the future.

### **7.6.2 Implications of the Promotion System**

The higher education institutes should create an organisational culture that is conducive to women's career advancement. Enhancing the awareness of and appreciating women's qualities and leadership is the first step toward rectifying gender-related issues such as inequality and discrimination. Moreover, teachers and principals are in great need of continuous professional development (CPD). The participants in this research reported that they would have a comprehensive understanding of the training before take part in the work. Then, face-to-face learning and development opportunities for all staff, including the training of different levels of leaders, are needed to strengthen these capacities. In addition, the influence of a female role model cannot be underestimated. Good careers guidance could stimulate the female scholars' expectations for leadership positions and ambitions in leadership.

The over-reliance on performance measurement, such as the publications and research grants, should be considered carefully, and it fails to consider broader skills like teaching and academic leadership. It encourages the HE institutions to be more research-focused and more competitive, but the scholars may be harmed by the benchmark, which is linked to more publications. The system of reviewing academic journals as the performance measurement needs to be improved, and more attention should be paid to the quality of academic research rather than the number of publications. The research in different disciplines should be treated differently, because some disciplines have only a small number of high-quality journals, and the research may cost too much time, and it is currently difficult to convert research into publications in time.

### **7.6.3 Policy Recommendations**

First and foremost, the policies and practices play a key role in addressing many of the barriers impeding women's upward mobility. Only when women receive sufficient policy

guarantee at work can they pursue career development without worries. For example, hire women based on their qualifications, promote women based on their performance, and publicly recognise the qualities and competencies demonstrated by women leaders. Also, family friendly policies should be implemented to help women leaders balance their dual roles (professional at work and caregiver at home). By establishing women's leadership in a higher education forum or similar organisation, encourage the women leaders to engage in social interactions beyond the workplace to build ties.

At the policy level, the experience from the universities in other countries can be used for reference. Once the policy or system has been introduced in the Chinese higher education system, attention should be paid on whether it is in line with the local conditions, and made adjustments according to the local conditions. For example, most research universities in the United States have introduced the policy of 'tenure-clock-stopping policies' for female teachers in need. This policy allows female teachers who need to take care of their children after childbirth to postpone the assessment period by one year, which provides a guarantee for women's academic career. In addition, in the UK and Australia, the application candidates of the national projects are required to explain whether their academic career has been interrupted in the application. For the applicants who have interrupted research due to childcare (including both men and women), appropriate extra points shall be given in the evaluation of academic achievements. If the universities only value the academic incentive effect of the system, without considering the need for relevant measures to support the development of teachers' work and life, it may have a negative impact on universities and teachers. At the policy level, it is suggested that the government could issue a normative programme to guide the higher education institutes introducing the evaluation system, so that the evaluation system can not only bring high volumes of outcomes, but also alleviate the publication pressure of teachers.

## 7.7. Recommendations for Future Research

- *More participants from Science and Engineering departments.* The current study has investigated the views of mid-career academic women within a limited number of Chinese mainland universities. Most of the respondents are working in humanities and social sciences departments. Therefore, future research could select more participants from Science and Engineering and other departments in higher education. The sample question could be: Do women leaders in different departments in higher education share the same career experiences? If so, to what degree do the differences play a role?
- *More research on the gender comparison.* In this study, 391 valid questionnaires were collected from female teachers and 16 female leaders were interviewed. Future research will be more persuasive if the views of male leaders who are also in the middle of their career could be investigated and a comparison made. The possible research questions could be: What are the differences between mid-career academic men and women in pursuing the promotion? What are the differences between men's and women's attitudes in the face of the obstacles to promotion?
- *More research on the cultural impact.* This study has highlighted the salient impact of the unique Chinese cultural characteristics on women's leadership, but not enough attention has been paid to Chinese culture in the design of this research. Hence, here are some suggestions for future research: What cultural values have significant impact on women's leadership in China? How do Chinese women leaders perceive women's leadership and plan their careers in this unique cultural context? By exploring these questions, the answers will generate deeper insight on the women's leadership in Chinese culture.
- *More research on different key variables.* Several key factors were not taken into account in the initial design of this study. For example, the discussion on publications

was out of expectation in the preparation stage of this research. It is hoped to pay continuous attention to this key variable in future research, and also take various promotion standards into consideration. All the promotion criteria should be fully considered to more reasonably assess the real strength of a qualified researcher. The sample questions for future research could be: What do women leaders think are the criteria to measure their leadership performance? What are the most important factors? In addition, the lack of knowledge of career planning was commonly observed in this study, so the future research could focus on CPD and the detailed career planning and career stage division in Chinese higher education.

## 7.8 Summary

As the last chapter of this thesis, this chapter summarises the research (see section 7.2. Summary of the Study) and its findings (see Section 7.3. Summary of the Findings) and discusses its original contribution to knowledge (see section 7.4. Original Contribution). The limitations of the study design are explained in section 7.5. *Limitations of the Conceptual Framework and Research Design*, and some implications of this study for practice are discussed in 7.6. *Implications for Practice*. Finally, some suggestions for future research in this field are put forward (see section 7.7. Recommendations for Future Research).

This study has increased the understanding of Chinese women's leadership, especially in higher education. It adds knowledge to provide a better understanding of the social phenomenon of leadership and gender, and it will contribute to future gender-related research in China. The expanding knowledge will not only attract Chinese attention to gender issues and leadership, but also attract Chinese scholars' attention to leadership learning and development. Finally, it is hoped that the results of this study will make people more aware of the inequality of Chinese women's leadership opportunities and help shape a better future of Chinese leadership and gender equality in education.

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## Appendices list

### Appendices 1 Questionnaire

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#### Questionnaire

**Study title: Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education in China: Barriers and Strategies.**

**中国高等教育职业生涯中期的女性：阻碍与对策**

您好，很高兴邀请您参加关于从事中国高等教育工作的女性员工职业发展道路的研究。该研究旨在了解女性职业发展中的阻碍和机会，探索女性职业发展的策略。完成本问卷的时间不超过 15 分钟。参加这项研究完全是出于自愿，您可以忽略不想回答的问题。问卷完成之后，您的答复将被保密，并且在提交后保证您的数据不被篡改。填写此问卷之前，请您确认您了解该研究的目的，并同意在未来的出版物中您的数据会被匿名使用。

I would like to invite you to take part in a study about the career paths of academic women working in universities in China to understand barriers and opportunities to career progression, and the strategies women adopt to progress their careers. It should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to omit any question. After completion, there is no way of identifying your responses as yours, so bear in mind it will not be possible to remove your data after submission. By completing this questionnaire, you are confirming that you understand the purpose of the study and that you give your consent for the use of your anonymous responses in presentations and in publications.

该研究由英国雷丁大学教育学院在读博士生赵嘉仪（电子邮箱：j.zhao3@pgr.reading.ac.uk）负责开展，其导师为雷丁大学教育学院副教授 Karen Jones 博士（电子邮箱：karen.jones@reading.ac.uk）。该调查已严格按照雷丁大学研究伦理委员会的程序进行审查，得到了调查的许可。如您需要，可要求提供关于该调查的详细信息。

This study is being undertaken by Jiayi Zhao (PhD student, Institute of Education, University of Reading, UK, email: j.zhao3@pgr.reading.ac.uk), supervised by Dr Karen Jones (Associate Professor, Institute of Education, University of Reading, UK, email: karen.jones@reading.ac.uk). This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

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### **Questionnaire**

1. 您的出生年份? In what year were you born? (enter 4-digit birth year; for example, 1976)

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2. 您的最高学历 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- 专科学历 College degree
- 本科学历 Bachelor's degree
- 研究生学历 Master's degree
- 博士学历 Doctorate degree
- 其他, 请具体描述。Other (please specify)

3. 请您选择您所在的区域 Which area do you come from?

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4. 您在目前的机构(学校)已经任职多少年?

How many years have you been employed in the current higher education?

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5. 您在高等教育领域已经任职多少年? How many years have you worked in the higher education system?

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6. 您任职于哪一个部门/学院？ In which faculty/department do you work? (please select one only)

- 艺术与人文学科 Arts & humanities
- 信息类相关专业 Information services
- 自然科学与工程技术 Science & technology
- 国际相关 International unit
- 商学院 Business school
- 市场与发展类 Marketing & development
- 其他, 请具体描述。Other (please specify)

7. 您现在的职称？ What is your current title?

- 助教 Teaching Assistant
- 讲师 Lecturer
- 副教授 Associate Professor
- 教授 Professor
- 行政岗位, 请具体描述 Administrative position (please specify)
- 其他, 请具体描述。Other (please specify)

8. 您有照顾他人的责任吗？ Do you have caring responsibilities outside work?

- 是的, 我需要照顾孩子。Yes – I have childcare responsibilities
- 是的, 我有其他(家)人需要照顾。Yes – I have career responsibilities
- 是的, 我要兼顾孩子和其他(家)人。Yes – I have both childcare and career responsibilities
- 没有。No

9. 以下哪一种最符合您现在的婚姻状况？ Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?

- 已婚。Married
- 丧偶。Widowed
- 离婚或分居。Divorced or Separated
- 同居伴侣关系或民事伴侣。In a domestic partnership or civil union
- 单身, 但是有稳定的关系。Single, but cohabiting with a significant other

单身, 从未结过婚。Single, never married

10. 以下哪一种最符合您的配偶的状态? 如果没有, 请选择‘不符合’。Which of the following categories best describes your spouse's/ partner's employment status? If not applicable, please choose N/A.

- 有全职工作。Employed, working full-time
- 有兼职工作。Employed, working part-time
- 没有工作, 正在寻找中。Not employed, looking for work
- 没有工作。Not employed
- 没有找工作的打算。Not looking for work
- 退休。Retired
- 残疾, 没有工作能力。Disabled, not able to work
- 以上都不符合。N/A
- 其他, 请具体描述。Other (please specify)

11. 以下哪一种最符合您的子女状况? Do you have any children?

- 是的, 都已经成年。Yes, all 18 or over
- 是的, 一个/多个未成年。Yes, one or more under 18
- 没有。No

12. 您如何形容您的职业规划? How do you describe your career planning?

- 十分清晰 Extremely clear
- 很清晰 Very clear
- 清晰 Somewhat clear
- 不太清晰 Not so clear
- 一点也不清晰 Not at all clear

13. 请说明您在多大程度上同意或不同意如下关于不同性别的陈述。Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with these statements about different genders.

完全不同意 Totally disagree (1)

不同意 Disagree (2)

中立态度 Neither disagree, nor agree (3)

同意 Agree (4)

完全同意 Totally agree (5)

- a) 女人应该被男人珍视和保护。Women should be cherished and protected by men.
- b) 在紧急情况下, 相对于女性, 男性更不容易崩溃。Men are less likely to fall apart in emergencies than women are.
- c) 男人比女人更加适合领导岗位。Men are more suited to leadership than women.
- d) 在我国, 对女性的歧视已经不再是一个问题。Discrimination of women is no longer a problem in this country.
- e) 社会上男女实现了平等。Society treats men and women the same way.
- f) 应采取更好的措施, 在工作场所中实现男女平等。Better measures should be taken to achieve equality (between the sexes) in the workplace.

14. 请说明您在多大程度上同意或不同意如下关于您所在机构的这些观点。Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with these statements on your institute.

强烈不同意 Strongly disagree (1)

不同意 Disagree (2)

中立态度 Neither disagree, nor agree (3)

同意 Agree (4)

强烈同意 Strongly agree (5)

- a) 我所在机构的高级管理人员是开放的、可接触到的。Members of senior management in this institution are open and accessible.
- b) 根据我的经验, 我们机构的管理人员/领导具有有效的人际交往能力。In my experience, managers at the institution have effective people skills.
- c) 我认为对有管理职责的员工来说, 拥有有效的人际交往技能是很重要的。I think it is important for staff with management responsibilities to have effective people skills.

- d) 根据我的经验，我所在部门的领导善于调整他们的管理风格，使团队中的每个人发挥最大的作用。In my experience, managers in my department are good at adapting their management style to get the most out of individuals in their team.
- e) 我认为我所在部门的领导会认真对待有关平等和多样性的问题。I feel the managers in my department take equality and diversity issues seriously.
- f) 总的来说，我认为我们的晋升机制是公平的，是重视个人绩效的。On the whole, I believe our promotion processes are fair and based on merit.
- g) 我觉得我的领导是支持弹性工作的（如兼职、工作分担安排、照顾家庭工作等）。I feel my manager supports flexible working (such as part-time working, job-share arrangements, home-working, etc).
- h) 我觉得自己能够在工作职责和家庭生活之间找到平衡点。I feel able to strike the right balance between my work responsibilities and my home life.

15. 请您站在管理者/领导的角度选择提拔女性员工的主要标准（多选）：Please select the major criteria for women to be promoted based on their managers' view:

- 有卓越的成就 Excellent achievement
- 出色的工作能力 Outstanding work capability
- 与领导保持良好的关系 Good relations with senior leaders
- 与同事/下级保持良好的关系 Good relations with colleagues/employees
- 高学历 High educational degree
- 丰富的工作经验 Rich work experience
- 领导重视提拔女性 Leaders' emphasis on promoting women
- 以较少的性别偏见公开竞争职位 Open competition for position with less gender bias
- 其他，请描述 Other (please specify)

16. 您认为您是否适合目前的工作？Please self-assess how well you are suited to your current job:

- 我觉得这份工作适合我，而且我还有更大的潜力 I feel the job is suitable for me, and I still have more potential.
- 我觉得这份工作正好适合我 I feel the job is suitable for me.
- 我感觉到压力，但我可以自我调节压力。I feel the pressure, but I could overcome that by adjustment

- 我尽我所能，但有些工作还是不太理想 I do my best, but there are some tasks being completed with imperfection.
- 我觉得这份工作不适合我，我需要提高我的工作能力、知识储备和经验。I do not feel the job is suitable for me, and I need to improve my capability, knowledge and experience.
- 我觉得我无法胜任这项工作，我需要在几年内调到比现在工作水平低一些的岗位。I feel I am not able to handle the job, and I need to move myself to a lower level of job for several years.
- 其他，请描述 Other (please specify).

17. 以下哪项陈述最能描述您目前职业发展中的机会: Please select which of the following statements best describes the opportunities you have to develop your career:

- 我在这个职位上非常出色，将被提升到更高的职位。I am very good in this position and will be promoted to a higher position.
- 我对目前的职位很满意，有晋升的机会。I am fine with the current position and there are opportunities for promotion.
- 我觉得晋升受到了限制。I feel there is a limit for further promotion.
- 我觉得晋升是不可能的。I feel further promotion is impossible.
- 其他，请描述 Other (please specify).

18. 与您同岗位的男性同事相比，以下哪项陈述最能描述您的想法: Please select which of the following statements best describes how you compare yourself to male colleagues:

- 我的工作表现比我的男同事好，我会有比他们更好的晋升机会。My performance is better than my male colleagues, and I will have a better promotion opportunity than they.
- 我的工作表现比我的男同事好，但是他们比我有更好的晋升机会。My performance is better than my male colleagues, but they have better promotion opportunities than me.
- 我的男同事们的工作表现比我好，他们比我有更好的晋升机会。The performance of my male colleagues is better than me, and they will have better promotion opportunities than me.
- 我的男同事的工作表现比我的好，但我会比他们有更好的晋升机会。The performance of my male colleagues is better than mine, but I will have better promotion opportunity than they.
- 无论性别差异，我所在的机构都有平等的晋升机会。The organization has equal promotion opportunities regardless of gender differences.

其他, 请描述 Other (please specify).

19. 在您看来, 怀孕是否会影响一个女性管理者目前的岗位和未来的晋升? In your opinion, does pregnancy influence the managerial position and promotion opportunities for a female manager?

- 一点也不。Not at all
- 有很小的影响 Has a little influence
- 有一些影响 Has some influence
- 有很大的影响 Has much influence
- 有极大的影响 Has very much influence

20. 您有兴趣参与进一步我们的调查吗 (采访的形式) ? Would you like to be involved in further research (interview)?

- 是的 Yes
- 没有 No

21. 如您对我们的进一步调查感兴趣, 请您留下您的联系方式: If you are interested in our further research, please leave your contact information:

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22. 请您分享您对本调查的意见与建议:

Please share any comments you have below:

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## Appendices 2 Interview Questions

### Research questions schedule

Basic information:

- Could you please tell me about your educational background (what subjects you studied and the qualifications you gained)?
- What is your current role and what are your management responsibilities? (Please describe your job content in detail).
- Could you please describe your characteristic or personality, and what is your hobby at leisure time?
- Could you please tell me your marital status, and do you have a child/children?
- How old is (are) your child (children) and in which grade(s)?

Main questions:

*Research question: What personal and professional motivators influence the choices they made in their career path?*

Interview questions:

- Why did you choose this career at the very beginning?
- How did your career in education begin and how did you get to where you are now? Please describe your career trajectory.
- Were there notable people or significant experiences from whom you learnt/gave you the confidence to pursue your education career?
- To what extent are you responsible for managing resources/ people/ budgets/ strategic decision making?
- Is your current job related to the major you studied in university? How do you evaluate this situation?
- At present, do you think the salary of teachers in HEIs equal to their endeavours at work? please specify.

*Research question: What are the perceived barriers and challenges to senior leadership in their current position?*

Interview questions:

- To what extent do you feel supported in your role by your family members?
- What support do you have at home? E.g. childminder, supportive partner etc.
- To what extent do you feel supported in your role by your followers/colleagues?
- What is the promotion mechanism of your institution and how did you be promoted to the present position? Please describe the promotion process.
- What are the essential annual assessment indicators (publications/ paperwork etc.) for your position and how do you evaluate them?
- Do you feel under the pressure of any kind of assessment? Please specify.
- Do you think your gender has affected your career and how?
- Do you think pregnancy and marriage could affect a woman's career? Why?
- Are there any stereotypical qualities that come to your mind when we talk about the promotion of male and female? (Please describe them separately) if there are some examples, please tell me.
- Do you feel you have experienced any unfair barriers to your career progression within the institution?

*Research question: What strategies do they adopt in their career to overcome the barriers?*

Interview questions:

- To what extent has your management practice been influenced by formal learning, for example, courses that you have attended, your degree (if applicable) or any CPD that you have undertaken?
- Please make a self-assessment of handling your current job, how do you think about the work content?
- Is there any informal approach that could help develop your managerial work managerial work? (reading/ lectures/others' help)
- Does your institution have career planning assistance for employees? How do you learn about career planning?
- What do you think the advantages and disadvantages for men and women when they compete for the same position? please describe separately.
- What is your career prospect planning in the (near) future?
- Do you have any suggestions for young girls who just start their career in higher education? (such as dos and don'ts)

### **Appendices 3 Interview Transcribing Example**







































## Appendices 4 Preliminary Coding List

### ▪ Codebook

#### ▪ Nodes

Name	Description	Files	References
Background information		0	0
Children		15	16
Education experience		16	21
Hobbies		14	15
Weekends		1	1
Main responsibility	Current job responsibility	12	15
Marriage		15	15
Personality		15	16
Professional title		16	17
Preliminary coding		0	0
Academic career trajectories		1	1
Academic trajectories		13	15
Better platform provided	Does the university provide a better platform for you?	8	9
Current role details	about current role, to what extent are you responsible for managing resources/ people/ budgets/ strategic decision making	16	29
Important people or experiences	Important people or experiences that have affected their career	16	16

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1

Name	Description	Files	References
Career planning	Career planning from now on	16	46
Career stages		14	16
CDP	Develop skills and training provided.	10	15
Gender & leadership		12	18
Gender & work	Do you think your gender has affected your career?	15	21
Gender & preference		13	21
job-hopping		1	1
Leader & leadership		11	11
Like or don't like in work		16	19
Motivation for the job		1	2
Motivation to HE	Why they choose the higher education	1	1
Motivation to teach	why they chose to be teachers	2	2
Obstacles		12	13
Other experiences		1	1
Other jobs	Have you ever thought about engaging in other industries? Why do you still want to stay in higher education?	11	11
Performance requirements	the performance requirements of your position every year,	12	19
Pregnancy and marriage & career	pregnancy and marriage could affect a woman's career?	13	13
Pressure	Did you feel some pressure when you were promoted	1	1

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2

Name	Description	Files	References
Promoting intention <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	14	14 <sup>✉</sup>
Promotion ambitious <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	8	10 <sup>✉</sup>
Publishing <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	11	19 <sup>✉</sup>
Relationship between colleagues <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	2	2 <sup>✉</sup>
Self-rated score <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	14	14 <sup>✉</sup>
Suggestions for young women <sup>✉</sup>	Do you have any suggestions for young women who just start their career in higher education? <sup>✉</sup>	16	16 <sup>✉</sup>
Supports from colleagues or leaders <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	11	11 <sup>✉</sup>
Supports from the uni <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	1	1 <sup>✉</sup>
Textbook knowledge & work <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	15	16 <sup>✉</sup>
Work & family <sup>✉</sup>	Balance between work and family. <sup>✉</sup>	2	2 <sup>✉</sup>
Family support <sup>✉</sup>	Do you think family members support your current job? <sup>✉</sup>	14	18 <sup>✉</sup>
Work VS salary <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	16	21 <sup>✉</sup>
Workload & pressure <sup>✉</sup>	<sup>✉</sup>	12	18 <sup>✉</sup>

■ 2020.03.25

3<sup>✉</sup>

## Appendices 5 Ethical Approval Form A (Version November 2018)

University of Reading  
Institute of Education  
Ethical Approval Form A (version November 2018)



Tick one:

Staff project: \_\_\_\_\_ PhD  \_\_\_\_\_ EdD \_\_\_\_\_

Name of applicant (s): Jiayi Zhao

Title of project: Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education in China: Barriers and Strategies.

Name of supervisor (for student projects): Dr Karen Jones

**Please complete the form below including relevant sections overleaf.**

	YES	NO
<b>Have you prepared an Information Sheet for participants and/or their parents/carers that:</b>		
a) explains the purpose(s) of the project	✓	
b) explains how they have been selected as potential participants	✓	
c) gives a full, fair and clear account of what will be asked of them and how the information that they provide will be used	✓	
d) makes clear that participation in the project is voluntary	✓	
e) explains the arrangements to allow participants to withdraw at any stage if they wish	✓	
f) explains the arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of any material collected during the project, including secure arrangements for its storage, retention and disposal	✓	
g) explains the arrangements for publishing the research results and, if confidentiality might be affected, for obtaining written consent for this	✓	
h) explains the arrangements for providing participants with the research results if they wish to have them	✓	
i) gives the name and designation of the member of staff with responsibility for the project together with contact details, including email. If any of the project investigators are students at the IoE, then this information must be included and their name provided	✓	
k) explains, where applicable, the arrangements for expenses and other payments to be made to the participants	✓	
j) includes a standard statement indicating the process of ethical review at the University undergone by the project, as follows: <i>'This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct'.</i>	✓	
k) includes a standard statement regarding insurance: <i>"The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request".</i>	✓	
<b>Please answer the following questions</b>		
1) Will you provide participants involved in your research with all the information necessary to ensure that they are fully informed and not in any way deceived or misled as to the purpose(s) and nature of the research? (Please use the subheadings used in the example information sheets on blackboard to ensure this).	✓	
2) Will you seek written or other formal consent from all participants, if they are able to provide it, in addition to (1)?	✓	
3) Is there any risk that participants may experience physical or psychological distress in taking part in your research?		✓
4) Have you taken the online training modules in data protection and information security (which can be found here: <a href="http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/Staffpages/imps-info-sec-selfenrol.aspx">http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/Staffpages/imps-info-sec-selfenrol.aspx</a> Please note: although this is on staff pages it is also for students.	✓	
5) Have you read the Health and Safety booklet (available on Blackboard) and completed a Risk Assessment Form to be included with this ethics application?	✓	
6) Does your research comply with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research?	✓	
7) If your research is taking place in a school, have you prepared an information sheet and consent form to gain the permission in writing of the head teacher or other relevant supervisory professional?	✓	
8) Has the data collector obtained satisfactory DBS clearance?		✓
9) If your research involves working with children under the age of 16 (or those whose special educational needs mean they are unable to give informed consent), have you prepared an information sheet and consent form for parents/carers to seek permission in writing, or to give parents/carers the opportunity to decline consent?		✓
	YES	NO
		N.A.

10) If your research involves processing sensitive personal data <sup>1</sup> , or if it involves audio/video recordings, have you obtained the explicit consent of participants/parents?	✓		
11) If you are using a data processor to subcontract any part of your research, have you got a written contract with that contractor which (a) specifies that the contractor is required to act only on your instructions, and (b) provides for appropriate technical and organisational security measures to protect the data?			✓
12a) Does your research involve data collection outside the UK?	✓		
12b) If the answer to question 12a is "yes", does your research comply with the legal and ethical requirements for doing research in that country?	✓		
13a) Does your research involve collecting data in a language other than English?	✓		
13b) If the answer to question 13a is "yes", please confirm that information sheets, consent forms, and research instruments, where appropriate, have been directly translated from the English versions submitted with this application.	✓		
14a. Does the proposed research involve children under the age of 5?			✓
14b. If the answer to question 14a is "yes": My Head of School (or authorised Head of Department) has given details of the proposed research to the University's insurance officer, and the research will not proceed until I have confirmation that insurance cover is in place.			✓
<b>If you have answered YES to Question 3, please complete Section B below</b>			

- Complete **either** Section A **or** Section B below with details of your research project.
- Complete a risk assessment.
- Sign the form in Section C.
- Append at the end of this form all relevant documents: information sheets, consent forms, tests, questionnaires, interview schedules, evidence that you have completed information security training (e.g. screen shot/copy of certificate).
- Email the completed form to the Institute's Ethics Committee for consideration.

**Any missing information will result in the form being returned to you.**

<b>A:</b> My research goes beyond the 'accepted custom and practice of teaching' but I consider that this project has <b>no significant ethical implications.</b> (Please tick the box.)	
<p>Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.</p> <p>For the questionnaire, there will be 150 female teachers who have worked in higher education for more than five years.</p> <p>For the interview, there will be 12 people, who are female leaders/managers in higher education institutions.</p>	
<p>Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words noting:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. title of project</li> <li>2. purpose of project and its academic rationale</li> <li>3. brief description of methods and measurements</li> <li>4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria</li> <li>5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)</li> <li>6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.</li> <li>7. estimated start date and duration of project</li> </ol>	
<p>The title of project is Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education in China: Barriers and Strategies.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) The research will explore career experiences of Chinese female academics working in universities in China to understand barriers and opportunities to career progression, and the strategies women adopt to progress their careers (if relevant).</li> <li>2) Mixed methods - quantitative and qualitative will be adopted. First, a questionnaire will be distributed online via SurveyMonkey. In the second phase, in-depth interviews will be conducted with a smaller sample who indicate at the end of the survey that they are willing to be contacted to participate.</li> <li>3) A purposive snowball sampling technique will be used, using connections with the ISLI centre in the University of Reading and contacts in HEIs around China. Criteria for inclusion in the study is: time served in academic career (e.g. minimum 5 years in academia is considered mid-career in China.) and participants must identify as female.</li> <li>4) The participants will be fully informed of the purpose of this research in a statement at the start of the survey, before they begin the survey. They will be informed that by taking part, they are consenting to participate in the</li> </ol>	

<sup>1</sup> Sensitive personal data consists of information relating to the racial or ethnic origin of a data subject, their political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life, physical or mental health or condition, or criminal offences or record.

<p>research. An information letter and consent form will be given to all participants in the interviews. Participation in this study is voluntary and the interview will take approximately one hour of their time. With their permission, the interviews will be recorded. The recording will be stored on a password-protected computer and destroyed at the end of the project. The recordings will be transcribed by the PhD researcher and their personal details anonymized in all transcripts.</p> <p>5) The estimated start date of the questionnaire will be 1st March and will be finished within three months. After that, the interview will take at least two months for the research to contact the interviewees and undertake interviews, but it might be longer in the case of something unpredictable happening.</p>	
<p><b>B:</b> I consider that this project <b>may</b> have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee.</p> <p>Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.</p> <p>Pilot study: survey 5 female academics, interviews, two female academics  Main survey: 200 female academics  Qualitative interviews with 12 female academics</p>	
<p>Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. title of project</li> <li>2. purpose of project and its academic rationale</li> <li>3. brief description of methods and measurements</li> <li>4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria</li> <li>5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)</li> <li>6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.</li> <li>7. estimated start date and duration of project</li> </ol>	

**RISK ASSESSMENT: Please complete the form below**

Brief outline of Work/activity:	Online survey via SurveyMonkey, followed by in-depth qualitative interviews (face-to-face) with female academics in Chinese Universities. Both elements of the study will involve a pilot study.	
Where will data be collected?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The survey data will be collected online by women in China</li> <li>• The interview data will be collected in person, via face-to-face interviews in China. The interviews will take place in University buildings.</li> </ul>	
Significant hazards:	None identified. The universities have a duty to health and safety.	
Who might be exposed to hazards?	N/A	
Existing control measures:	Health and safety policies exist in universities.	
Are risks adequately controlled:	Yes.	
If NO, list additional controls and actions required:	Additional controls	Action by:

**C: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:**

**Note:** a **signature is required.** Typed names are not acceptable.

I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm that ethical good practice will be followed within the project.

Signed: Print Name: Jiayi Zhao Date: 16/01/2019

STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE ETHICS COMMITTEE

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.

Signed: ..... Print Name.....Jill Porter. Date.....25<sup>th</sup> January 2019.  
(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative)\*

\* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

## Appendices 6 Information Letter



**Supervisor:** Dr Karen Jones  
*Phone:* +44(0)1183782603  
*Email:* karen.jones@reading.ac.uk  
**Researcher:** Jiayi Zhao  
*Phone:* +44(0)7928551863  
*Email:* j.zhao3@pgr.reading.ac.uk

### Interview information sheet

**Study title:** Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education in China: Barriers and Strategies.

**Dear [name]**

I would like to invite you to take part in a study about the career paths of academic women in higher education in Chinese higher education.

#### **What is the study?**

The study is being conducted in fulfilment of a PhD Education, at the University of Reading, United Kingdom. The study will explore factors affecting women's careers in universities in China, specifically, the opportunities and barriers, both internal and external, present in women's professional career paths, and if women seek to progress their career, the strategies they adopt. It aims to provide theoretical and practical outcomes for researchers, policy makers, universities and women themselves, to support women's career development in universities in China.

#### **Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You have been invited to take part in the research because you expressed an interest in being involved in this study in an earlier survey on women's careers in universities in China, and because the previous information I have indicates that you are a female working at a university in China who is at mid-career stage.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is entirely up to you whether you participate in this study. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting the researcher, Jiayi Zhao by email at: j.zhao3@pgr.reading.ac.uk

#### **What will happen if I take part?**

With your agreement, participation will involve:

- At your convenience, there will be an interview with you, conducted in person by the researcher named at the top of this letter. The interview will take approximately one hour.
- You will be asked questions related to your educational and family background, your current work role, and the opportunities and barriers, both internal and external, present in your professional career path in higher education.
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded, to facilitate collection of information.
- The recording will be later transcribed for analysis and your personal details anonymised in all transcripts. The recording and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer and destroyed at the end of the project.

#### **What are the risks and benefits of taking part?**

The information given by participants in the study will remain confidential and will only be seen by me as researcher and my supervisor, named at the top of this letter. Neither you, the university nor anyone referred to in the interview will be identifiable in any published report resulting from the study. Information about individuals will not be shared with the university where you work or any outside body.

Participants in similar studies have found it interesting to take part because interviews can provide an opportunity for reflection and growth in understanding of their experiences, motivations, ambitions and

approach to career progression. It is anticipated that the findings of the study will be useful for understanding how women can be better supported to develop careers in universities in China.

***What will happen to the data?***

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you, the university, your colleagues or family to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym and will be referred to by that in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer, and only the researcher and supervisor named on this letter will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study will be presented at national and international conferences. It will be written up for my PhD thesis, as well as written reports and articles. You may request electronic copies of the thesis or publications if you wish.

***What happens if I change my mind?***

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, the data will be discarded.

***What happens if something goes wrong?***

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Dr Karen Jones by phone: +44(0)1183782603 or email: [karen.jones@reading.ac.uk](mailto:karen.jones@reading.ac.uk)

***Where can I get more information?***

If you would like more information, contact me by email: [j.zhao3@pgr.reading.ac.uk](mailto:j.zhao3@pgr.reading.ac.uk)

I do hope that you will agree to your participation in the study.

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,

Jiayi Zhao

## Appendices 7 Consent Form



**Supervisor:** Dr Karen Jones

*Phone:* +44(0)1183782603

*Email:* karen.jones@reading.ac.uk

**Researcher:** Jiayi Zhao

*Phone:* +44(0)7928551863

*Email:* j.zhao3@pgr.reading.ac.uk

**Study title:** Mid-career Academic Women in Higher Education in China: Barriers and Strategies.

### **Participant Consent Form**

I have read the Information Sheet about the study and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the study is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Please tick as appropriate:

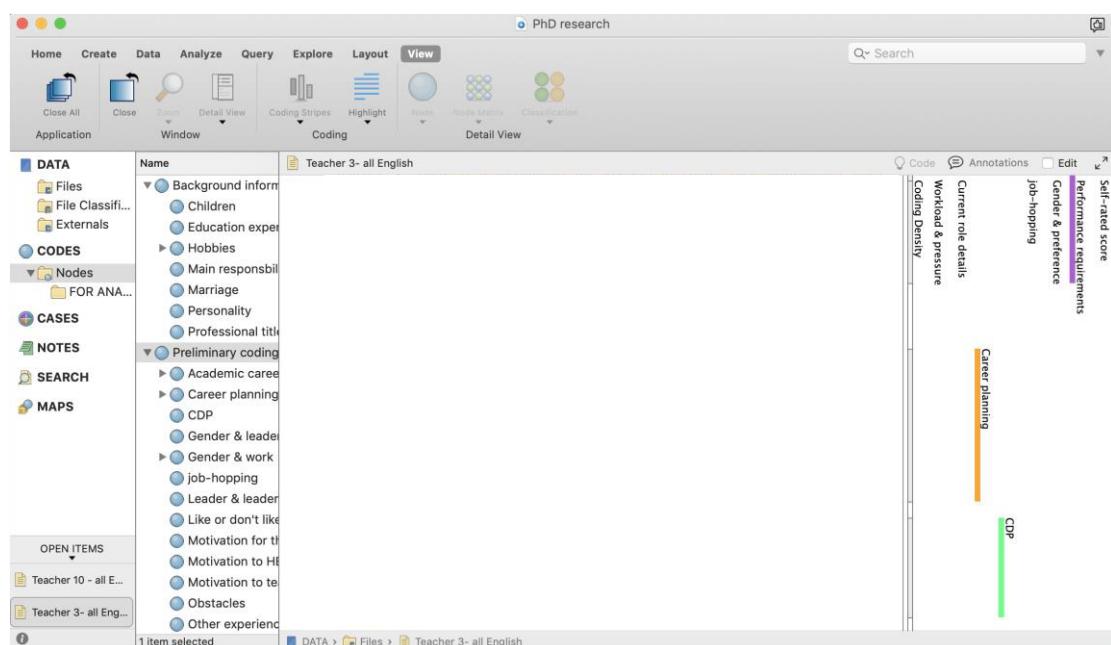
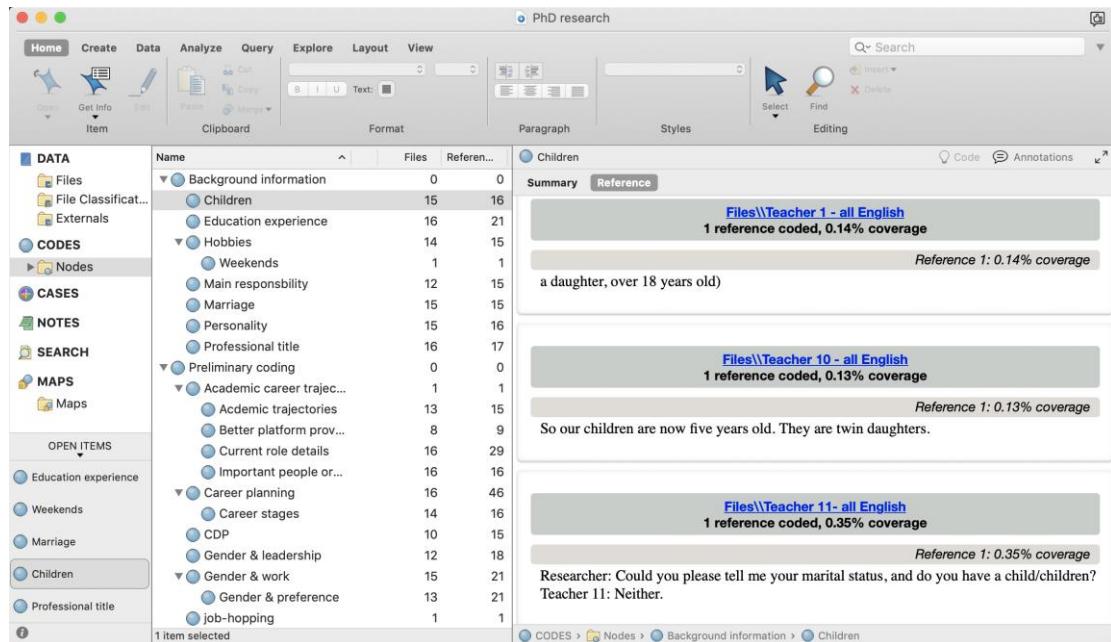
- I consent to take part in the interview.
- I consent to this interview being recorded.
- I consent to the use of anonymized quotes in subsequent publications.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendices 8 Example of Coding

The following four figures are the screen shots from NVivo 12.



The screenshot shows the NVivo software interface with the following details:

- Left Panel (Tree View):** Shows the project structure with nodes like 'DATA', 'CODES', 'CASES', 'NOTES', 'SEARCH', and 'MAPS'. The 'Education experience' node is selected.
- Right Panel (Table View):** A table titled 'Education experience' with columns 'Name', 'Files', and 'References'. The 'Education experience' node has 16 files and 21 references. Below this, a detailed table shows the breakdown of these codes:
 

Name	File Name	In Folder	References	Coverage
Background information	Teacher 1 - all English	Files	1	2.05%
Children	Teacher 10 - all English	Files	1	1.35%
Education experience	Teacher 11 - all English	Files	2	0.92%
Hobbies	Teacher 12 - all English	Files	1	2.64%
Weekends	Teacher 13 - all English	Files	1	3.68%
Main responsibility	Teacher 14 - all English	Files	1	0.94%
Marriage	Teacher 15 - all English	Files	1	1.56%
Personality	Teacher 16 - all English	Files	1	1.58%
Professional title	Teacher 2 - all English	Files	3	8.02%
Preliminary coding	Teacher 3 - all English	Files	2	1.22%
Academic career trajec...	Teacher 4 - all English	Files	2	10.71%
Academic trajectories	Teacher 5 - all English	Files	1	4.15%
Better platform prov...	Teacher 6 - all English	Files	1	2.23%
Current role details	Teacher 7 - all English	Files	1	2.20%
Important people or...	Teacher 8 - all English	Files	1	4.59%
Career planning	Teacher 9 - all English	Files	1	4.13%
Career stages				
CDP				
Gender & leadership				
Gender & work				
Gender & preference				
job-hopping				

Name	answer which RQ	Description	Files	References
Preliminary coding			0	0
Academic career trajectories	RQ1.		1	1
Academic trajectories	RQ1.		13	15
Better platform provided	RQ3.	Does the university provide a better platform for you?	8	9
Current role details	RQ1.	about current role, to what extent are you responsible for managing resources/ people/ budgets/ strategic decision making	16	29
Important people or experiences	RQ2.	Important people or experiences that have affected their career	16	16
Career planning	RQ3.	Career planning from now on	16	46
Career stages	RQ3.		14	16
CDP	RQ3.	Develop skills and training provided.	10	15
Gender & leadership	RQ3.		12	18
Gender & work	RQ3.	Do you think your gender has affected your career?	15	21
Gender & preference	RQ3.		13	21
job-hopping	RQ3.		1	1
Leader & leadership	RQ3.		11	11
Like or don't like in work	RQ3.		16	19
Motivation for the job	RQ2.		1	2
Motivation to HE	RQ2.	Why they choose the higher education	1	1
Motivation to teach	RQ2.	why they chose to be teachers	2	2
Obstacles	RQ4.		12	13
Other experiences			1	1
Other jobs	RQ3.	Have you ever thought about engaging in other industries? Why do you still want to stay in higher education?	11	11
Performance requirements	RQ4.	the performance requirements of your position every year,	12	19
Pregnancy and marriage & career	RQ4.	pregnancy and marriage could affect a woman's career?	13	13
Pressure	RQ4.	Did you feel some pressure when you were promoted	1	1
Promoting intention	RQ3.		14	14
Promotion ambitious	RQ3.		8	10
Publishing	RQ4.		11	19

## Appendices 9 ANOVA results

### Questionnaire Q7 with Q12

#### Descriptives

Q12 describe career planning

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1	30	3.00	.910	.166	2.66	3.34	1	4
2	167	2.99	.982	.076	2.84	3.14	1	5
3	101	2.37	1.027	.102	2.16	2.57	1	4
4	21	2.05	.973	.212	1.60	2.49	1	4
5	60	2.75	1.068	.138	2.47	3.03	1	4
6	12	2.67	1.155	.333	1.93	3.40	1	4
Total	391	2.73	1.046	.053	2.63	2.84	1	5

#### ANOVA

Q12 describe career planning

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	36.512	5	7.302	7.203	.000
Within Groups	390.291	385	1.014		
Total	426.803	390			

#### Measures of Association

	Eta	Eta Squared
Q12 describe career planning *	.292	.086
Q7 current title		

There was a significant difference of different academic titles on their career planning description at the  $p < .05$  level for the five conditions [ $F(5, 385) = 7.203, p = 0.000$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the teaching assistants ( $M = 3.00, SD = 0.910$ ) was significantly different than professors ( $M = 2.05, SD = 0.973$ ).

### Questionnaire Q 2 with Q12

→ **Oneway**

**Descriptives**

Q12 describe career planning

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1	2	3.50	.707	.500	-2.85	9.85	3	4
2	43	2.70	.989	.151	2.39	3.00	1	4
3	241	2.88	1.001	.064	2.75	3.00	1	5
4	102	2.37	1.107	.110	2.16	2.59	1	4
5	3	3.33	.577	.333	1.90	4.77	3	4
Total	391	2.73	1.046	.053	2.63	2.84	1	5

**ANOVA**

Q12 describe career planning

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	20.458	4	5.114	4.858	.001
Within Groups	406.345	386	1.053		
Total	426.803	390			

**Measures of Association**

	Eta	Eta Squared
Q12 describe career planning *	.219	.048
Q2 edu		

There was a significant difference of education background on the academic women's attitudes towards on their description at the  $p < .05$  level for the five conditions [ $F(4, 386) = 4.858, p = 0.001$ ]. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the college degree holders ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.707$ ) was significantly different than education PhD degree holders ( $M = 2.37, SD = 1.107$ ).

Questionnaire Q2 with Q19 :

**ANOVA**

Q19

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	11.961	4	2.990	3.682	.006
Within Groups	313.441	386	.812		

Total	325.402	390		
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### Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: Q19

Tukey HSD

(I) Q2 edu	(J) Q2 edu	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	1.547	.652	.125	-.24	3.33
	3	1.309	.640	.246	-.44	3.06
	4	1.059	.643	.469	-.70	2.82
	5	.833	.823	.849	-1.42	3.09
2	1	-1.547	.652	.125	-3.33	.24
	3	-.237	.149	.504	-.65	.17
	4	-.488*	.164	.026	-.94	-.04
	5	-.713	.538	.676	-2.19	.76
3	1	-1.309	.640	.246	-3.06	.44
	2	.237	.149	.504	-.17	.65
	4	-.250	.106	.131	-.54	.04
	5	-.476	.523	.893	-1.91	.96
4	1	-1.059	.643	.469	-2.82	.70
	2	.488*	.164	.026	.04	.94
	3	.250	.106	.131	-.04	.54
	5	-.225	.528	.993	-1.67	1.22
5	1	-.833	.823	.849	-3.09	1.42
	2	.713	.538	.676	-.76	2.19
	3	.476	.523	.893	-.96	1.91
	4	.225	.528	.993	-1.22	1.67

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

### Measures of Association

	Eta	Eta Squared
Q19 * Q2 edu	.192	.037

### Q19

Tukey HSD<sup>a,b</sup>

Q2 edu	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
2	43	2.95	
3	241	3.19	3.19
4	102	3.44	3.44
5	3	3.67	3.67
1	2		4.50
Sig.		.666	.102

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets

are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size =

5.744.

b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used.

Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

### Descriptives

Q19

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimu	Maximu
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
1	2	4.50	.707	.500	-1.85	10.85	4	5
2	43	2.95	.925	.141	2.67	3.24	1	5
3	241	3.19	.902	.058	3.08	3.31	1	5

4	102	3.44	.896	.089	3.27	3.62	1	5
5	3	3.67	.577	.333	2.23	5.10	3	4
Total	391	3.24	.913	.046	3.15	3.33	1	5

“Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for the college degree holders ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.707$ ) was significantly different than education bachelor’s degree holders ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 0.925$ ).

