An Exploratory Study of Women's Work Values in the Chinese Context: A Grounded-Theory Approach

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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate women managers' work values in the Chinese sociocultural context and to explain how these work values affect their career success. This paper also explores how social and cultural factors affect Chinese women's work value formation process.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Using a grounded theory approach, we collected and analyzed data through in-depth interviews with 12 women managers in the banking industry in northeast China.

Findings

Our analysis identified eight dimensions of Chinese women's work values and how they affect women's career success in the Chinese context. We also found that although both social and cultural factors affect women's work values, the effect of traditional Chinese culture is still profound.

Originality/Value

Our study extends the literature on Chinese women's work values and provides a better understanding of traditional Chinese culture's effect on contemporary Chinese women, particularly in developing cities.

Keywords: work values, women's career management, grounded theory, indigenous studies in China

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1. Introduction

For a long time, the adage "women hold up half the sky" was familiar to Chinese people. During the Maoist era, as they benefitted from a series of policies, women's participation rate in the workforce was "among the highest in the world" (Cook and Dong, 2011, p. 949). Although the rate declined after 1979 due to economic reforms and new mechanisms for the labor force (Zhan and Montgomery, 2003), women's participation remains above 40% in the contemporary Chinese workforce market (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2017), close to that of the US's 47% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Unfortunately, compared to their high participation rate in the workforce, the percentage of women who are managers in the private and public sector in China is 16.8%, lower than those of Singapore (25%) and Thailand (25.5%), and far below that in other major developed countries such as the US, Germany, and France (ILO Global Report, 2015).

The gap between women's workforce participation and the proportion of female managers in China is thought-provoking, and some previous studies have been conducted to explain women's absence from management positions in China. Many of these studies focused on barriers and indicated the influences of socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors on Chinese women's careers (Cooke, 2003, 2001, 2010; Cook and Dong, 2011; Cho *et al.*, 2015; Jonge, 2014; Aaltio and Huang, 2007). However, only a few of them have explored the effects of individual intrinsic characteristics, especially women's identities and beliefs (Bu and McKeen, 2000; Ye and Zhao, 2018; Zhao and Jones, 2017). Although these individual characteristics were demonstrated to have significant effects on women's career status in these studies, studies on Chinese women's understanding, such as work values and attitudes, toward their careers are still scant (Woodhams *et al.*, 2015).

Hence, a study on Chinese women's work values can contribute to a better understanding of women's attitudes toward and behavior in career progress.

Work values are defined as generalized beliefs about the relative desirability of various aspects of work (e.g., pay, autonomy, working conditions) and work-related outcomes (e.g., accomplishment, fulfillment, prestige; Lyons *et al.,* 2010). They affect people's behaviors and numerous aspects of organizational behavior such as motivation, work attitudes, and career choices (e.g., Bardi and Schwartz, 2003; Gorgievsk *et al.,* 2017; Robbins and Judge, 2012; Super and Bohn, 1970). Work values also play a critical role in individuals' career success (Brown, 2002; Wei and Taormina, 2014). Previous research has established that gender differences exist in some work value dimensions due to gender role stereotypes, and these differences can lead to different work aspirations and career choices between men and women (Walker *et al.,* 1982; Lechner *et al.,* 2018; Liu, 2013). Similarly, awareness of gender roles and other workplace issues also varies from East Asian to Western countries (Singh and Gaur, 2020; Pattnaik and Panda, 2020). In Western countries, traditional gender role stereotypes have been significantly mitigated by the progress of modernization, yet traditional gender roles and gender inequality are still prevalent in East Asian countries (Hori and Kamo, 2017; Park, 2021). The distinctions in gender roles and culture between Eastern and Western women may correspond to differences in their values, leading to different attitudes and behaviors in career progress (Yi *et al.,* 2015).

However, it has been observed that studies on work values that lack an indigenous perspective may lead to overlooking crucial differences across societies and cultures (Yang *et al.,* 2018). This study seeks to explore Chinese women managers' work-values framework from an indigenous perspective and explain how these work values affect women's career success while also illustrating the social and cultural origins of these work values.

Our study contributes to the literature in three ways: First, drawing on a grounded theory, we develop a comprehensive framework of Chinese women managers' work values to expand our understanding of them. Moreover, we aim to enrich the pool of Chinese work values and create valuable data for further research to develop scales that can measure work values in China. Second, we discuss the effects of work values on Chinese women's career success. We establish evidence and a foundation for empirical research on Chinese women's values and career progress in China. Third, since our study investigates the social and cultural origins of work values, we especially contribute to understanding the effects of traditional Chinese culture and philosophies, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Yin-Yang.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Work Values in Contemporary China

Owing to globalization and rapid change in Chinese society, work values have significantly changed in contemporary China (Ralston *et al.,* 2017; Yang *et al.,* 2018). According to the crossvergence theory, in a changing society like China's, a unique value system is derived from both traditional belief systems (national culture) and social factors (economic ideology; Ralston *et al.,* 1993, 1997). This has led to a coexistence of traditional and modern values in the Chinese work values system (Faure and Fang, 2008).

A number of previous studies have interpreted how social factors affect values in China and identified that those factors emerged as Chinese values. For instance, Cao (2009) illustrated that there was a tendency to transition to individualism as a result of the wealth and economic growth in Chinese society, pointing out that this transition led to attitude changes toward jobs, money, and family. Likewise, several studies have indicated that materialism now has a greater impact on the values of Chinese people (Gu and Hung, 2009; Ogden and Cheng, 2011, Xiao and Kedir, 2019). Materialism not only

affects Chinese people's behavior as consumers, but also affects their desire for wealth and status; ultimately, it may bias job-related attitudes and behaviors (Leung, 2008). In addition, Faure and Fang (2002) noted eight pairs of paradoxical values in the contemporary Chinese society: the "new" values they discussed are professionalism; self-expression and directness; respect for legal practices; respect for simplicity, creativity and competence; short-term orientation; modern approaches; individualism; materialism and ostentatious consumption. In sum, as various studies have revealed significant changes in contemporary Chinese values, we suppose that modern values derived from Western philosophies can affect Chinese women's work values and further alter their choices and success in the workplace.

On the other hand, traditional Chinese belief systems, such as Confucianism and Daoism, still play a crucial role in forming values and significantly influence people's attitudes and behavior in China (Zhang *et al.,* 2011). Confucianism was identified as the most influential philosophical foundation of Chinese culture (Huang and Charter, 1996; Rarick, 2007). In addition to Hofstede's (1991) and Schwartz's (1992) theories of cultural values that addressed Confucian values, Chinese culture connection (1987) developed the Chinese Value Survey (CVS), which highlighted "Confucian work dynamism" as an Eastern dimension unrelated to a Western cultural mentality. However, because CVS is a culture-free scale and some items in the survey may have already lost relevance in Chinese society, there may be a gap between CVS items and present-day Chinese values (Hsu and Huang, 2016).

However, previous studies also suggested that more attention should be paid to other Asian philosophies like Daoism in addition to Confucianism (Hill, 2006; Shaiq *et al.,* 2011). By developing the first Daoist work value scale, Lin *et al.* (2011) concluded that Daoist work values positively influence managers' intellectual stimulation. However, another study indicated that understanding the concepts of Daoism at the individual level

might lead to different awareness and leadership behavior (Xing and Sims, 2011). Considering all of this evidence, it seems that further understanding of the effects of traditional Chinese philosophies and culture on work values is imperative.

2.2. Women's Work Values in China

According to Eagly's (1987) social role theory, men and women experience divergent social role expectations and social norms. This can lead to different social roles and social behavior between men and women and cause differences in work values (Schwartz and Rubel, 2005). Notably, in traditional Chinese culture, women are placed in subordinate positions and taught to follow the doctrine of the "three obediences," which ask a woman to obey her father, husband, or son at different stages in her life (Granrose, 2007). Although since 1949, the status of women in the family and in society has significantly improved, previous studies have confirmed gender differences still exist in career preferences and work values, as well as income and education (Qing, 2020). Several studies have shown higher achievement in men compared to women, and greater consideration and kindness among women (Lan *et al.,* 2009; Wong and Chung, 2003). These results indicate that Chinese women still place great emphasis on values related to family roles. Nevertheless, Jiang and Yang (2011) analyzed data from 1155 Chinese employees and found that women employees showed a higher tendency toward material orientation and self-realization. The authors supposed that this may have been due to women's desire for gender equity. Collectively, these studies outline the critical role that traditional Chinese culture plays in women's work values. Some positive effects on women's careers may coexist with negative effects.

Overall, this study explored the following research questions:

1. What work values influence Chinese women managers' promotion process?

2. How do these values affect women managers' promotion in the workplace?

3. What sociocultural factor impacts the work value formation process most?

3. Methods

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) that has been defined as "a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, p. 273). The term was proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), who developed it during their studies on medical issues. Because grounded theory advocates discovering a theory from data (Turner, 1983), it stands out as a means of building and elaborating on a theory (Gligor *et al*., 2015), especially in little-known or complex fields (Mello and Flint, 2009). As mentioned, studies on Chinese women's work values, which impact their promotion, and on how these values are formed, are still few. Moreover, the effects of traditional Chinese culture are inexplicit. As grounded theory takes an inductive reasoning approach, with the advantage of fitting closely to the situation (Egan, 2002; Turner, 1983), it enables us to have a better understanding of the cultural environment and women's work values from a new perspective to achieve our research goals (Locke, 2001).

3.1. Sampling

In order to uncover women managers' work values and their effects on women's promotion and value formation, our data are all collected from women managers via semi-structured interviews.

In grounded theory research, sampling is not only conducted during the initial design phase, but is necessary throughout the analysis process (Locke, 2001). Three types of theoretical sampling are utilized according to the stage of analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 206). The first is open sampling, which refers to choosing respondents who can provide the broadest overview on a research question to acquire sufficient detail on which to base a theory. At this stage, as our purpose is to identify female managers' work values—especially those that may affect their promotion prospects—we focused on interviewing female managers. The second type of theoretical sampling is relational and

variation sampling. This means that during data collection and analysis in the interview process, the range of respondents should be narrowed. In this step, we reduced the scope of the interviewees and limited them to managers in non-administrative departments. The last type of theoretical sampling, discriminatory sampling, refers to choosing interviewees whose answers may help us adjust or improve our research. In this step, we invited two junior managers to be our interviewees.

Overall, during the interview process, we collected 12 interviewees' responses from in-depth interviews. All of them were female managers in the Chinese financial services sector. Three of them were departmental directors, five were vice-directors, and the other four were junior managers. Because of the slow rate of promotion in the banking industry, only two of them were under 35 years of age (born in the 1980s). The average age of respondents was 39.5 years, and their ages ranged from 34 to 44 years.

Insert Table I about here

3.2. Data Collection

During the data collection process, we conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews with 12 interviewees. The interviews were performed over 1 week in September 2015. In grounded theory, data collection is followed immediately by analysis after every interview (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), so we ended our data collection when we found that we could acquire no further information from the interviews—a situation described as theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.61; Turner, 1981, p.235). The interviews ranged in length from 35 to 75 minutes, and the average interview time was about 50 minutes. Because of conditions stipulated by the banks, the interviews were handwritten instead of tape-recorded. Besides verbal communication, we also recorded

some nonverbal cues such as the attitudes of our participants. Some secondary sources such as reports on shareholding reform in bank industry were also collected for analysis.

At the beginning of our interviews, each interviewee was asked to draw a diagram to show important moments in her career, such as beginning to work for the bank, getting a promotion, getting married, or giving birth. We prepared some questions before the first interview, including "What do you think about competition with your male colleagues in the workplace?" "What do you think the effect of the one-child policy has been on your career choice?" and "Do you feel family demands interrupt your job?" Other questions were added to our question list in subsequent interviews, such as "Are there any limits on women's socializing after work, such as drinking parties with colleagues and clients, and do you think these limitations can be obstacles to women's career development?"

3.3. Data Analysis

Because data collection and analysis were simultaneous, we began our data analysis immediately after collection. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), we analyzed data in three steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Open coding. In the open coding process, we undertook naming and conceptualization using the data collected in the interviews. We found 26 concepts related to work values and promotion. However, other concepts found in the interviews were not recurring themes, so we excluded them from the initial coding results.

Axial coding. In the axial coding process, we analyzed the results of the open coding process, categorizing the 26 concepts into 10 categories: risk avoidance, Yin-Yang balancing, desire for fairness, the importance of history, desire for recognition, filial piety, long-term perspective, Wu-Wei, tolerance, and renunciation.

Selective coding. Selective coding is the process of sifting through the categories to clarify the categories that most closely relate to a research question. In this stage, we chose eight of the 10 categories, eliminating renunciation and tolerance.

Insert Figure 1 about here

4. Findings

Based on 45 sampling items, 26 concepts emerged in the open coding process. Ten categories were formed in the axial coding step, and ultimately, we identified the eight themes below as female managers' work values.

4.1. Risk Avoidance

In the Chinese cultural context, risk avoidance is defined as preserving one's life from disasters and danger (Fung, 1997). As one dimension of work values, it includes abiding by rules, working hard to avoid taking risks or making mistakes in one's work, and avoiding falling into predicaments in one's personal life. Western research has shown results similar to ours. In previous studies, researchers have enumerated several fundamental values, such as uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1983) and conservation (Schwartz, 1992), which is related to unpredictable situations. Both of these studies recognized the values of risk or uncertainty avoidance as especially significant dimensions in Asian cultures.

Consistent with previous studies, we found that risk avoidance could affect female managers' promotion both at work and in their lives. In this dimension, our participants showed a strong tendency to avoid risk. At work, the value of risk avoidance included avoiding making any mistakes, obeying industry rules and obeying their organizations. Our participants told us the following:

"I am always very careful to do my job, because mistakes aren't tolerated in the banking industry" (Participant B, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Another participant said,

"I always work so hard, just because I do not want to make any mistakes"

(Participant A, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

At work, female managers with high risk avoidance are cautious and conscientious; this kind of trait helps others recognize them as good employees, and they are more likely to be promoted. In other words, if an employee shows a low level of risk avoidance, she may be labeled as an irresponsible person, and this label will make gaining a promotion more difficult.

On the other hand, in terms of family, risk avoidance means avoiding putting oneself in a dilemma in one's personal life to women managers. Female managers who rank highly in the family dimension show careful consideration of safety for their futures, especially regarding risk to their family finances and marriages. The former includes unexpected pay for family members or oneself. The latter describes the risk of divorce or loss of harmony in the couple's relationship. Typical examples from our participants follow:

"Nowadays, Chinese society is changing fast. I don't know what will happen in 10 or 20 years, so I need to work hard and save money for the future" (Participant D, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

Yet another interviewee stated,

"In my generation—people born in the 1970s—many men did not like their wives having better performance in the workplace, because that would hurt their pride. To avoid such a situation, if I face a chance for a promotion, I will think about its influence on my marriage" (Participant F, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

In this dimension, we found both positive and negative influences on female promotions. First, high risk avoidance corresponds with a stronger desire for rewards and

promotion. On the other hand, if they are not fully understood by their families, a tendency to avoid marital risk might stop female candidates from accepting such offers.

4.2. Desire for Recognition

The desire for recognition describes the degree to which people care about others' opinions of them. The Confucian conception of social order and a collectivist agricultural background deeply affect Chinese people and their relationship networks (Chen and Chen, 2004; Hwang, 1998), leading to a strong desire for others' recognition. We found that others' opinions still influence women's everyday work and career choices. Recognition can be further divided into two dimensions: desire for recognition and fear of criticism. The former includes a desire to be admired; the latter includes the fear of being doubted and scruples about social contracts. Examples of these two dimensions follow:

> *"I was so happy to be praised by my supervisor when he told me I would be promoted to a managerial position. Being recognized means more than being promoted to me"* (Participant D, personal communication, September 15, 2015). This shows a desire for recognition. The next quote shows fear of criticism:

> *"Sometimes I feel too tired to be a manager, but I'm afraid that if I give up my job, someone will say I lack the capacity to be an excellent manager. I really don't want to be judged as a loser or a deserter"* (Participant H, personal communication, September 16, 2015).

These examples suggest that the desire for recognition can result in women being promoted to or at least staying in managerial positions. In other contexts, the same value can also be a stumbling block in women's career development:

> *"In China, there is a specific social relationship that is called guan-xi, and to maintain guan-xi with clients and managers from other organizations, private social contact with them may be necessary. Because most of them are males—and*

in traditional Chinese culture, men and women should keep each other at a distance—some women, including me, may feel pressure and want to be scrupulous about this kind of social contact" (Participant F, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

Women with a high fear of criticism may pay too much attention to others' opinions and be restrained by traditional thinking. Fear of being judged and criticized may make it difficult for them to establish and maintain personal relationships with male colleagues, supervisors, or clients. Since guan-xi as a personal relationship is deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural environment (Butt *et al.,* 2020), compared to junior female managers, middle managers tend toward less fear of criticism or have strategies to deal with unreasonable criticism.

The desire for recognition is double-edged. It can be a driving force behind women gaining promotions as they seek praise and recognition. However, it also can be a roadblock for some women, who are afraid of going unrecognized or of being criticized.

4.3. Importance of History

The degree to which people attach importance to history is further divided into personal experience and acquired knowledge. In our study, participants with higher scores in this value tended to make promotion choices depending largely on their personal existing experience or knowledge. In other words, when these participants judge themselves as lacking experience or professional background, they may give up on being promoted:

"I don't think I can be a top or middle manager in the future because I don't have that many different job-based experiences in different departments. Since I started my job at this bank, I have only worked in one department. Even though I have good performance here and that resulted in me becoming a junior manager, I

don't think I can get another promotion" (Participant C, personal communication,

September 14, 2015).

Another interviewee gave another example:

"I won't apply for a higher position because my major in college was not in

finance, but in business and trade. I think my lack of professional knowledge of

finance would be a disadvantage as a middle manager. To be honest, being a

junior manager is lucky enough for me" (Participant F, personal communication,

September 15, 2015).

In terms of personal history, although most participants had similar educational

backgrounds and some junior managers even had higher academic qualifications, a lack

of experience still made some women lack confidence in their abilities. In contrast,

middle managers in this study scored low in this value, but even when they lacked the

experience for a new position, they were still confident in their career success. One

participant described the following:

"I have served in only one department since I entered this bank, but I don't

regard that as a disadvantage, because I have acquired enough knowledge and

experience from my job even for a higher position" (Participant D, personal

communication, September 15, 2015).

4.4. *Filial Piety*

A core concept in Confucianism and an essential manifestation of humanity is filial

piety (Fan, 2006). In a study by the Chinese Culture Connection (1987), the value of

integration, which includes filial piety, was related to Hofstede's (1983) power distance.

However, Hwang (1999) argued a contrasting opinion that no similar concept can be

found in other cultures, and he demonstrated that the Confucian ethical system is not only

based on respect between a superior (parents) and a subordinate (children) but is based on

favoring the intimate. Furthermore, we found that despite the increasing number of

nuclear families, young people are usually financially independent from their parents' today, and the intimate relationships between our participants and their parents can give young people a sense of family responsibility and promote their aspirations to achieve better compensation or at least keep a stable job. Therefore, a background-limited explanation of filial piety in the workplace includes being responsible for parents' families, providing financial support for parents, and avoiding causing their parents' inconvenience.

> *"I'm glad that I have a job with very good pay, so I can provide a better life for my parents; at least they won't be worried about their medical expenses in their old age"* (Participant B, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

> Yet another participant said,

> *"Like many people of the same generation, I have two sisters to share the responsibility of supporting our parents, so I don't need to worry about it. Instead of worrying, I hope to at least never need to ask my parents for financial support—like [for] my house, my child's education, and my car. I hope my husband and I can earn enough money for all of these things to make sure we don't need to bother our parents"* (Participant C, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Apart from meeting parents' material needs, the definition of filial piety also includes obeying parents' preferences and bringing parents honor (Chow, 2001). However, in this study, although no participant reported feeling great expectations on bringing honor to the family name, some junior managers still showed a tendency to conform to their parents' desire for them to have children, even if doing so caused career stagnation:

> *"When my husband and I did not have a child, we felt pressured by our parents"* (Participant E, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

Regarding the filial piety dimension, the different stereotypes between men and women were observed at the level of an interviewee's ability to "honor family," even though this ability was not always found during interviews. Nevertheless, the level of material support participants wanted to provide their parents universally escalated our participants' aspirations to work hard or get promoted. Although in this study it was not the case with our participants, we cannot deny that, in some situations, a high level of obeying and pleasuring parents may be an obstacle for women's career development.

4.5. Long-term Perspective

One cultural dimension that focuses on the degree to which society embraces the long-term devotion to traditional values addressed in Hofstede's study (1991) is long-term perspective. Unlike the other four dimensions, because of its philosophical flaws, such as being contradictory and unclear (Redpath and Nielsen, 1997), the long-term perspective was not as well-received as the other four dimensions (Fang, 2003). In this study, we are inclined to partly adopt Hofstede's new explanation of long-term orientation released in 2011, which is "related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future, or the present and past" (p. 8). In the new explanation, Hofstede (2011) further clarified long-term orientation by comparing it with short-term orientation. Among the 10 descriptions of long-term orientation, future orientation (the most important events in life will occur in the future), being flexible to circumstances to achieve one's long-term goals (e.g., a good person adapts to the circumstances; what is good and bad depends on the circumstances; transitions are adaptable to changed circumstances) highly correlated with female managers' promotion. An example of future orientation follows:

> *"About 20 years ago, I was a newcomer in this bank. At that time, I didn't even have an image of a 'career plan' or 'career path;' the only thing I knew was that there would be many chances for me in the future. Of course, several months later, with more experience and knowledge, I defined a career plan for*

development and promotion" (Participant D, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

Here is a counter-example of future orientation:

"I didn't have any career plan, and I never thought I could be a manager someday. I got a promotion after I entered this bank 15 years ago because my boss asked me to move into management" (Participant H, personal communication, September 16, 2015).

An example of being flexible in response to circumstances follows:

"At the early stage of my career, I was working in a subbranch and wanted to be a good manager someday. Although many people think that beginning their career in a subbranch is disadvantageous for promotion, I developed a strategy to achieve my goal. By taking part in events organized by the branch, I finally got a chance to transfer to the branch" (Participant B, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

In this dimension, we found that the long-term perspective contributed to female managers' promotions by prompting them to establish longer-term career goals and maintain an attitude of flexible responses on their way to career success. In contrast, a short-term perspective may lead to excessive attention to one's jobs or tasks and may result in lacking a plan for career development; it may also have a negative influence on career success.

4.6. *Wu-Wei*

Wu-Wei is a core principle of Daoism. In the fundamental Daoist book *Dao Te Ching*, the legendary Daoist philosopher Lao Tzu (600–470 BCE) named the dynamic universal principle and everything's origin *Dao* (Blakney, 1955), and Wu-Wei is the way that Dao exists and changes. In Chinese, *wu* literally means nothing, and *wei* means to do; therefore, an ambiguous understanding of Wu-Wei would be caused by such rigid

interpretations as "doing nothing," "non-activity," or "governing by doing nothing" (Xing and Sims, 2011). Instead, more accurate explanations of Wu-Wei were mentioned in previous studies, such as "acting without artificiality and arbitrariness," "not overdoing," (Fung, 1997, p. 100) and "non-intrusiveness or non-interference" (Lee *et al.*, 2008, p. 94). However, because of its complex and profound content, explanations and understandings of Wu-Wei are divergent, which makes the definition of Wu-Wei behaviors intricate and difficult to understand. A more comprehensive and clear understanding of Daoism and Wu-Wei was developed by Creel (1970), who identified branches of Daoism as contemplative Daoism and purposive Daoism. Contemplative Daoism represents the philosophy in its original purity, and "advocated genuine detachment, true inactivity, with the sole aim of achieving serenity for the individual" (Creel, 1970, p. 70). On the other hand, purposive Daoism refers to a means to gain and use power to achieve certain goals, which is incompatible with contemplative Daoism.

In this study, we found a positive effect of purposive Wu-Wei on our participants' behavior as employees and manager candidates. One example follows:

"I don't think marriage will be a barrier for women progressing. At least in our bank, prejudice against women such as the 'traditional social roles of women' or [the belief that] 'women cannot be good leaders' could hardly directly influence our promotion. I must say barriers do exist; for example, the different retirement ages for women and men mean that I suffer the disadvantages of being a top manager, but some factors do not have as many substantial influences as people think they do. We should tactically ignore these factors and be more concerned about those important things instead of demonizing them and making them an excuse for failure" (Participant B, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

Yet another interviewee explained an example of contemplative Wu-Wei:

"Although as a veteran employee, I have not gotten a chance to be a senior manager, I think working hard is the most important thing for getting a promotion because it is how I got my promotion to the junior manager position. There are too many barriers to women's progression; for example, there are some differences between women's leadership style and men's leadership style. If I become a senior manager, maybe I can't perform as well as [as I do] being a junior manager" (Participant C, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

In this dimension, we found that purposive Wu-Wei had a positive influence on women's aspirations and positive behaviors for career development, which resulted in making progress in their workplace. On the other hand, contemplative Wu-Wei may incur passive attitudes and behaviors, such as giving up efforts to achieve career success or only focusing on daily task without a desire or passion for personal development in the workplace.

4.7. Yin-Yang Balancing

Briefly, the balance of yin and yang is a frame for understanding conflicts or relationships between opposing elements. As the term suggests, Yin-Yang balancing is based on the ancient Chinese philosophy of Yin-Yang, which advocates that conflicting or opposite elements are constantly in existence; the opposing elements are named yin and yang space as a whole (Peng and Nisbett, 1999). Furthermore, the opposing elements are conflicting and complementary, and they interact and transform under specific conditions (Li, 2016; Tian, 2002). They reach temporal balance in the process of constantly changing. In summary, the three tenets mentioned in Li's (2016) study— holistic, dynamic, and duality balance—may be helpful for understanding Yin-Yang balancing and behavior in conformity with this balance. In this study, we found that although all of our participants showed an inclination to balance work and life when

referring to the above three tenets, only a select few participants behaved consistently with the value of Yin-Yang balancing.

> *"I don't see work and personal life as diametrically opposite parts of my life. I believe a change in one part can escalate the other one in some conditions. For example, when I got a promotion, I became able to acquire more information and better networking (guan-xi). As a result, I could share this new information and network with my families within legal and corporate restrictions, so they can also make progress in their careers and do the same thing for me in return"* (Participant G, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

On the other hand, we also got a counterexample from another participant:

> *"I know conflicts always exist, and both work and family are parts of my life. But I don't want a promotion right now because I think I have achieved a good balance between work and family, and if I receive a promotion, the balance may be destroyed, and my life will be unbalanced"* (Participant K, personal communication, September 17, 2015).

Regarding the three core tenets of Yin-Yang balancing, dynamic balancing was the watershed for the middle and junior managers who participated in our interviews. In this study, we found that managers who followed all the tenets of Yin-Yang balancing showed more aspiration and were more confident in their career successes. On the other hand, female managers who desire static balance may be satisfied with the existing state of affairs.

4.8. Need for Gender Fairness

Between men and women, a need for gender fairness can be considered an exotic value dimension in modern Chinese society. Although the concepts of gender equality and women's enlightenment were introduced to Chinese society at an earlier time, they became well-known and widely applied in this society thanks to the May 4th Movement;

they were further reinforced through a series of policies implemented by Mao (Leader, 1973). Before these, for a long period in Chinese history, gender equality was not a mainstream concern in China. In this study, despite the other variables, we classified the need for gender fairness under divergence and found that the need for gender fairness had an effect on most of our participants but still differed to a degree. Two examples are as follow.

> *"We cannot deny that there are some physiological differences between genders, but for this job, influence from the differences is limited, so I think some policies, like gender-based retirement policies, are unfair to women"* (Participant B, personal communication, September 14, 2015).

> *"Prejudice in promotion exists, and I think that is unfair. But I can still partly understand the situation, because male managers have some advantages when acting as a senior or top manager"* (Participant E, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

In summary, the degree of the need for gender fairness causes differences in work aspirations. In this study, we did not find evidence that a high need for gender fairness may promote female managers' aspirations; however, a low need for gender fairness may lead to "leaving the game" early.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that there are eight work value dimensions related to women's promotion, including risk avoidance, desire for recognition, the importance of history, filial piety, long-term perspective, purposive Wu-Wei, Yin-Yang balancing, and need for gender fairness. Among these eight dimensions, long-term perspective, Yin-Yang balancing, the need for gender fairness, and purposive Wu-Wei are positively related to women's likelihood of being promoted, conversely, importance

of history is negatively related to promotions. Additionally, the other dimensions (risk avoidance, desire for recognition, and filial piety) may affect women's promotions both positively and negatively, depending largely on the degree. Finally, both social and traditional culture factors impact the formation process of work values. However, traditional culture, including Confucianism, Daoism, and Yin-Yang, plays a dominant role in value formation.

5.1. What Work Values do Women Managers Hold and What are Their Origins?

First, in this study, we found eight dimensions of work values that construct women's work values in China. These values were risk avoidance, desire for recognition, the importance of history, filial piety, long-term perspective, purposive Wu-Wei, Yin-Yang balancing, and the need for gender fairness. Seven are related to Chinese traditional culture, including Confucianism (desire for recognition, the importance of history, filial piety, and long-term perspective), Daoism (risk avoidance and purposive Wu-Wei), and Yin-Yang (Yin-Yang balancing). However, the last one, the need for gender fairness, is regarded as the product of social changes. These work values compose a unique value system, as suggested by crossvergence theory (Ralston, 1993). Additionally, this study also confirms that although both cultural and social factors can affect women's work values, the effect of traditional culture is still profound and strong (Warner, 2010).

5.2. How do Work Values Affect Women Managers' Promotion in the Workplace?

One of our goals for this research was to clarify how values influence women's promotion. Thus, we focused on differences between junior and middle managers as well as the similarities. Similarities can reveal the common traits of women managers, and differences between junior and middle managers can explain the reasons for the scarcity of female middle and top managers in China, especially in developing cities.

Among the eight dimensions of work values, almost all the female managers were highly consistent in three dimensions: risk avoidance, desire for recognition, and filial

piety. According to our findings, these three values can influence women employees' work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., conscientious and working hard) and thereby affect their career progression. However, in some situations, these values also have side effects on women's progress from junior to middle management positions. For example, the undue tendency toward risk avoidance may cause a hidebound attitude and lack of adventurous spirit; extreme thirst for recognition and unquestioning filial piety may lead to absolute obedience to parents. If a woman's parents value her family role more than her work role, it may be difficult for her to put more effort into a middle management job.

On the other hand, as stated in the Findings section, there are prominent differences between middle and junior managers in five dimensions. First, long-term perspective, Yin-Yang balancing, the need for gender fairness, and purposive Wu-Wei could contribute to females' promotion not only by promoting their career aspirations, but also by helping them implement more flexible tactics and strategies when facing conflicts and challenges in their career path. In addition, another dimension, importance of history, had a negative effect on promotion, as it causes females to lack confidence and proactive behaviors in the workplace.

Combining information from our interviews and diagram, there are two likely origins of gaps between junior and middle women managers, namely pre-employment and workplace factors (Loughlin and Barling, 2001). Pre-employment factors include family influence and school education. Prior studies have noted that differences in parents' work values, behaviors, family education, and social status may lead to differences in their children's work values (Bryant *et al.,* 2006; Johnson *et al.,* 2020). In this study, although all our participants were from dual-income families, which may help them to build their work value systems as good employees (e.g., "It is natural for women to have a full-time job" Participant C), differences arising from family factors may cause

women mangers to make different choices during their careers than men would. Aside from family factors, schools also shape people's values (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). As a social setting for children, school environments can not only teach about right or wrong in a direct way; they can also facilitate the socialization process (Grusec and Hastings, 2014). Therefore, differences in school education and experiences can also affect women's work values and career success.

Women managers' work values are also shaped by workplace factors, such as organizational structure, job content, and promotion opportunities (Kraaykamp *et al.,* 2019). For instance, we found that that risk avoidance is normally strengthened by the banking industry, and different ages of retirement may change some women managers' belief in promotion. Additionally, through daily communication, some opinions from supervisors and colleagues—such as those on gender roles in family issues and differences in leadership between women and men—can also alter women's values and attitudes towards their jobs and promotion.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 depicts the framework, origin and effect of women's work values. It also illustrates work values ultimately impact career success by affecting women's attitudes and behaviors. Besides, it shows that in women's work values formation process, pre-employment and workplace factors impact the relationship between sociocultural factors and work values.

5.3. Contributions to the Literature

This study makes several contributions to existing literature. First, although there are significant gender differences in Chinese work values, previous studies have paid little attention to building a framework for Chinese women's work values. Based on a

grounded theory methodology, the current study established a framework of Chinese women's work values, and its findings can provide an accurate insight into women's values in the Chinese cultural context. Second, the findings of this study also show that various traditional Chinese philosophies may have a comprehensive impact on women's value systems, particularly, Yin-Yang philosophy (as an origin of women's work values) as well as Confucianism and Daoism, which may extend our knowledge of traditional culture's effect on contemporary people in China. Besides, as aspects of Chinese culture such as Confucianism have influenced Japanese and Korean culture (Froese *et al.,* 2018; Xu *et al.,* 2020), our findings can also provide a deeper insight into culture and women's work values in these Asian countries. Third, although researchers have argued that traditional values are still widespread in China (Hu and Scott, 2016), few of them have confirmed the positive effect of these traditional values on Chinese women's workplace behaviors and careers (Bao and Zhong, 2021). By highlighting both positive and negative effects of traditional values, this study also offers a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between women's values and their career status in contemporary China.

5.4. *Practical Implications*

In addition to the above theoretical contributions, our findings have several practical implications for women employees, educators, managers, and organizations in China. Women employees should be aware that in addition to social and political factors, their work values largely influence their promotion. For women employees who aspire to career success, it may be necessary to regulate and adjust attitudes, behaviors, and strategies to attain their career goals. For example, some participants in our study were concerned that their experiences were not sufficient for higher managerial positions; if they want to obtain greater career success, they need to consider whether their concerns are justified and try to drop excessive worries.

Furthermore, our study revealed that women employees' awareness of gender equality is still not strong. As pre-employment factors play an important role in the work value formation process, families and education services should make more efforts to implement gender-equitable education.

In addition, our findings also show that some traditional work values are positively related to career progression, suggesting that managers should encourage and guide women subordinates to translate these traditional work values into behaviors related to the promotion. Moreover, our study indicates that the effects of traditional culture are still widespread and dominant, and managers should support women employees to balance various roles and manage their careers more effectively.

To enhance women's status and increase diversity in the workplace, organizations should first have a correct understanding of women employees' work values and develop proper policies to support women employees. Our study reveals that traditional work values affect women's promotion both positively and negatively; therefore, organizations should be aware of which values impact women's advancement and give preference to women employees who are more likely to progress to senior managers in the future. Moreover, having an accurate awareness of women's work values can also contribute to efficient work motivation strategies, such as organizational behavioral modification, since managers and organizations would be able to know the outcomes of modification in advance (Kumar and Misra, 2012). Additionally, organizations should help employees overcome obstacles that appear due to traditional values. For example, policies that encourage career self-management can help employees who lack long-term perspective and purposive Wu-Wei manage their career paths more efficiently. On the other hand, policies such as different retirement ages for women and men may have negative impacts on work values and should be modified, even if those policies are not designed to reduce the status of women employees.

5.5. *Limitations and Future Research*

A limitation of this study is that our data were collected from the same city in northeast China, which may lead to the oversight of generational and regional differences in work values (Ralston *et al.,* 2018; Yang *et al.,* 2018). Thus, a better understanding of cross-generation and cross-region values needs to be developed. Furthermore, all of our participants were from the same two banks, which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Likewise, although we confirmed the relationship between women's work values and their career success and expounded on why these values affect women's careers, our research is still limited by the lack of acknowledgment of the mechanisms affecting the relationship between values and careers. Similarly, the current study explained the reasons for the formation of work value differences. Further study could assess the effects of these factors.

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TABLE I Participant Characteristics

Participants #	Sector	Position	Enterprise Ownership	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children
A	Business Department	Vice Director	SOE	40	Married	1
B	Business Department	Director	SOE	43	Married	0
C	Business Department	Vice Director	SOE	42	Married	1
D	Administrative Department	Director	SOE	42	Married	0
E	Business Department	Vice Director	SOE	43	Married	1
F	Administrative Department	Vice Director	Commercial Bank	37	Married	1
G	Business Department	Director	SOE	37	Married	1
H	Administrative Department	Junior Manager	SOE	42	Married	1
I	Business Department	Junior Manager	SOE	44	Married	1
J	Business Department	Junior Manager	SOE	35	Married	1
K	Business Department	Vice Director	SOE	36	Married	1
L	Business Department	Junior Manager	Commercial Bank	34	Single	0

FIGURE 1 Data Structure

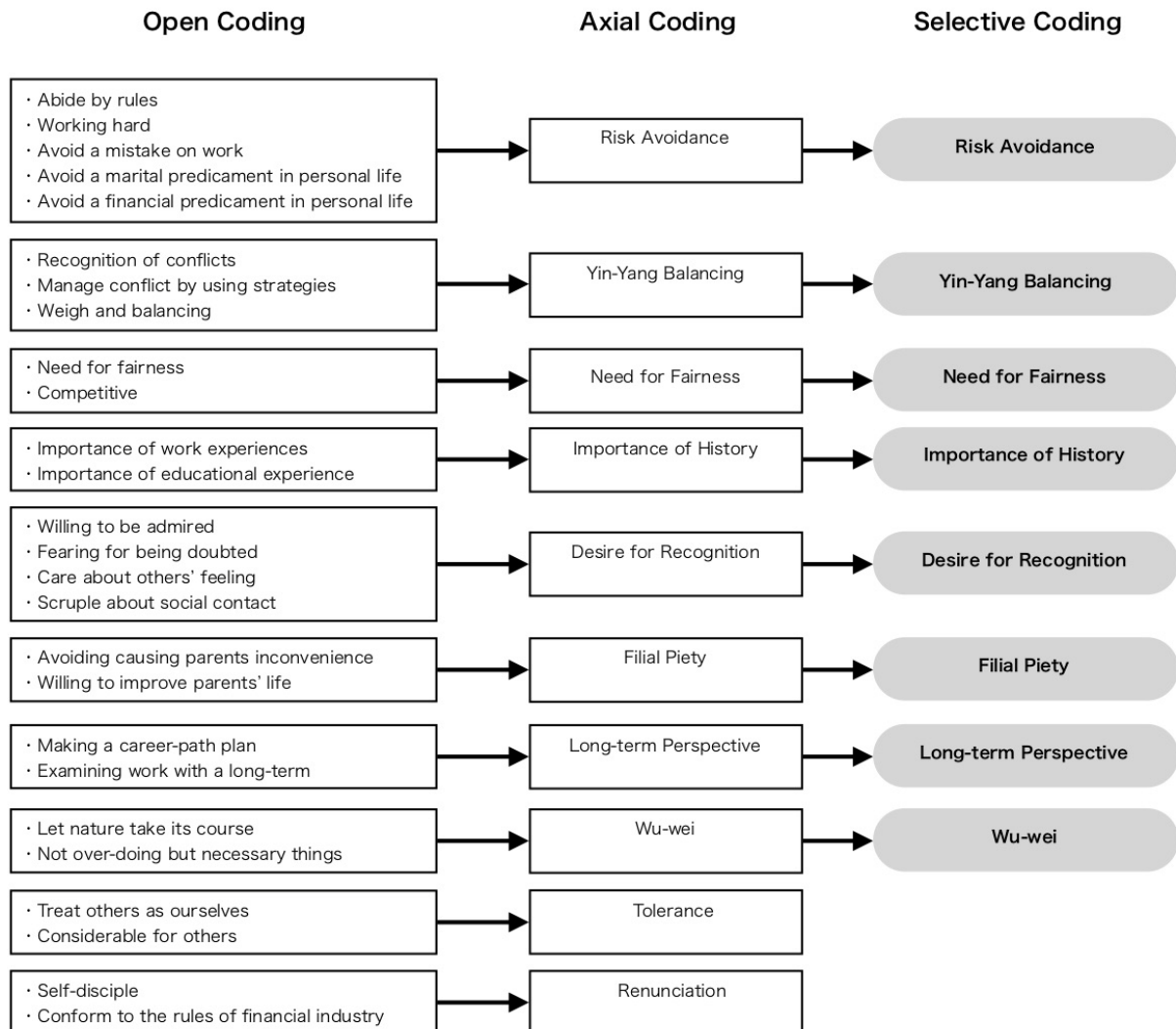| Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
· Abide by rules · Working hard · Avoid a mistake on work · Avoid a marital predicament in personal life · Avoid a financial predicament in personal life	Risk Avoidance	Risk Avoidance
· Recognition of conflicts · Manage conflict by using strategies · Weigh and balancing	Yin-Yang Balancing	Yin-Yang Balancing
· Need for fairness · Competitive	Need for Fairness	Need for Fairness
· Importance of work experiences · Importance of educational experience	Importance of History	Importance of History
· Willing to be admired · Fearing for being doubted · Care about others' feeling · Scruple about social contact	Desire for Recognition	Desire for Recognition
· Avoiding causing parents inconvenience · Willing to improve parents' life	Filial Piety	Filial Piety
· Making a career-path plan · Examining work with a long-term	Long-term Perspective	Long-term Perspective
· Let nature take its course · Not over-doing but necessary things	Wu-wei	Wu-wei
· Treat others as ourselves · Considerable for others	Tolerance	
· Self-disciple · Conform to the rules of financial industry	Renunciation	

FIGURE 2 Framework of Chinese Women Managers' Work Values