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Women Entrepreneurs in China: Dialectical Discourses, Situated Activities, and the (Re)production of Gender and Entrepreneurship

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Women Entrepreneurs in China: Dialectical Discourses, Situated Activities, and the
(Re)production of Gender and Entrepreneurship

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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identification, new materialism, performativity

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Dedication

For women entrepreneurs who have shared their life stories with me and for my mother who has inspired my interest in Chinese women's working lives

Acknowledgments

There are many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for the completion of this project and my overall experience living as an international graduate student in Tampa. Many thanks to my dissertation co-advisor, Dr. Patrice M. Buzzanell, without whose guidance and encouragement this project would not have come to fruition while my walk on this scholarly path would have been faltered. I became a doctoral student in the Communication Department at USF the same year Patrice came in from Purdue to be the department chair, but she did not become my advisor until my third year into the program, when I felt increasingly frustrated and disoriented about my old plans. Taking her Career Theory seminar was a turning point for me, where I found my passion for organizational communication and topics such as resilience and gender and organizing, which have indeed formed the foundation of this project. Long story short, after this turning point and truly encountering Patrice, I grew rapidly as a researcher and my goals became increasingly clearer. I thank Patrice for her advice, insights, mentorship, and wisdom that will continue guiding me in my career. I am grateful for the care, encouragement, support, and confidence that she has given me. I feel lucky to have an advisor who is familiar with the struggles international students tend to face. She is my role model for an amazing scholar, mentor, and human being.

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teaching but also about navigating relationships in academia, for which I am grateful. I appreciate him for practicing his caring and supportive approach to relational communication in our advisor-advisee relationship. I thank Keith for being an advocator for my mental health and general wellbeing. Apart from asking about my academic progress, he would also check in with me whether I practiced self-care and mindfulness, which I sometimes forgot. I also thank him for his presence as a faculty member with whom I share the membership in the LGBTQA+ community. Tokenism aside, his presence makes me feel more at ease in heteronormative worlds.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
Abstract.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Metatheoretical and Theoretical Overview.....	5
1.1.1 Theoretical Goals and Contributions of this Dissertation.....	7
1.2 Summary and Outline of Chapters.....	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	15
2.1 Entrepreneurship Normed Male-Masculine.....	15
2.1.1 A Critical Discursive Orientation to Women’s Entrepreneurship	17
2.1.2 Women Entrepreneurs in China.....	19
2.2 Ontological Positioning: Structuration Theory.....	22
2.2.1 Structure and System	23
2.2.2 Rules and Resources	24
2.2.3 The Duality of Structure	26
2.2.4 Modalities and Dimensions of Structure.....	27
2.2.5 Agent, Agency, and Power	29
2.2.6 Time and Space.....	32
2.2.7 Locally Determining Materiality—Sociomateriality/Agential Realism	33
2.3 Theoretical Framework Part 1: The Structural Model of Identification	40
2.3.1 Foregrounding Intersectionality.....	41
2.3.2 The Duality of Identity and Identification	44
2.3.2.1 Identity	44
2.3.2.2 Identification.....	46
2.3.2.3 Duality.....	47
2.3.3 Regionalization	49
2.3.3.1 Characteristics of Identification.....	51
2.3.4 Situated Action in Sociomateriality.....	53
2.3.3.2 Situated Action.....	53
2.3.3.3 Situated Action as Boundary Making Discursive Practices	55
2.4 Theoretical Framework Part 2: Competing Meanings and Discursive Struggles	58
2.4.1 Dialogism.....	61
2.4.2 Key Components of RDT	64
2.4.2.1 Four Sites of Struggle	64
2.4.2.2 Centripetal-Centrifugal Discourses.....	64

2.4.2.3 Genre of Communication.....	65
2.4.2.4 Forms and Praxes of Struggle.....	66
2.4.2.5 Contrapuntal Analysis.....	68
2.4.3 Application in Communication.....	69
2.4.4 Considering RDT in Sociomateriality	72
2.5 Summary and Statement of Research Questions: Bridging SMI and RDT	74
Table 1. Bridging SMI and RDT	74
2.5.1 Compatible.....	75
2.5.2 Complementary.....	79
2.5.3 Research Questions.....	83
 Chapter 3: Methodology	 86
3.1 Qualitative Interviews with a Narrative Approach	87
3.1.1 Participants.....	89
3.1.2 Procedures.....	94
3.1.2.1 Interview Protocol Design	94
3.1.2.2 IRB and Participants Recruitment	95
3.1.2.3 Interview Process	98
3.1.3 Data analysis	100
3.1.3.1 Contrapuntal Analysis.....	100
3.1.3.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory.....	103
3.1.4 Positionality	105
3.2 “Bad” mother: An interlude	107
 Chapter 4: Competing Discourses	 112
4.1 Discourse of Misalignment (DOM): Women Entrepreneurs as Misplaced Bodies	118
4.1.1 (Unsettled) Women and Femininity Unsettle Business	118
4.1.2 Women Entrepreneurs Ruin Nei-Wai (Inside-Outside) Balance.....	134
4.1.3 Motherhood is Incompatible with Entrepreneurship	142
4.1.4 Women/Girls Need a Stable Job Instead of Ventures.....	146
4.1.5. Women in the Face of Immovable Traditions	150
4.2 Discourse of Integration (DOI): Women Entrepreneurs as Agents of Change and Possibilities	159
4.2.1 Women Entrepreneurs and Femininity Enrich Entrepreneurship.....	160
4.2.2 Women Entrepreneurs Create New Family Harmony	166
4.2.3 Motherhood and Entrepreneurship Complement Each Other.....	173
4.2.4 Women Seek Entrepreneurial Ventures.....	181
4.2.5 Women in the Wake of Progressive Changes.....	184
 Chapter 5: The Interplay of Discourses	 189
5.1 Nonantagonistic-Antagonistic Struggle.....	203
5.1.1 Entertaining.....	204
5.1.1.1 Conforming.....	204
5.1.1.2 Disassociating (to Entertain).....	208
5.1.2 Countering.....	209

5.1.2.1 Disassociating (to Counter).....	209
5.1.2.2 Obsoleting	211
5.1.3 Negating.....	213
5.1.3.1 Rebellng.....	214
5.1.3.2 Questioning.....	216
5.2 Direct-Indirect Struggle	219
5.2.1 Ambiguity: Creating Semantic Wiggle Room.....	219
5.2.1.1 Shifting.....	219
5.2.2 Ambiguity: Tempering the Authoritativeness	222
5.2.2.1 Quantifying.....	222
5.3 Serious-Playful Struggle.....	224
5.3.1 Seriousness.....	224
5.3.1.1 The Senior.....	224
5.3.2 Playfulness	226
5.3.2.1 The Witty	226
5.3.2.2 The Xia.....	227
5.4 Polemic-Transformative Struggle.....	230
5.4.1 Balance.....	230
5.4.1.1 Compromising.....	231
5.4.2 Hybrid	235
5.4.2.1 Complementing.....	235
5.4.2.2 Queering.....	238
5.5 Voiced-Enacted Struggle	244
Chapter 6: Discussion	251
6.1 Contributions: Engaging with Literature Through Competing Discourses	254
6.1.1 Unsettlement VS. Enrichment	256
6.1.2 Ruining Balance VS. Creating New Harmony	259
6.1.3 Incompatibility VS. Complementarity between Motherhood and Entrepreneurship.....	263
6.1.4 Needing Stable Job VS. Seeking Ventures	266
6.1.5 Immovable Traditions VS. Progressive Changes	269
6.2 Contribution to RDT	272
6.2.1 Sociomateriality of Dialectical Discourses	273
6.2.2 The New Dimension	275
6.2.3 Extending all Four Existing Dimensions	277
6.3 Contribution to SMI.....	283
6.3.1 Characters of Identification.....	283
6.3.2 Identity Regions	286
6.4 Limitations and Future Directions	287
6.4.1 Chengyu as Memorable Messages of Gendering.....	288
6.4.2. Thicker Intersectionality	289
6.4.3 Queering.....	289
6.4.4 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	290
6.4.5 Entrepreneurial “Traits”/Entrepreneurship	291
6.4.6 More on RDT.....	291

6.4.7 Methods.....	292
6.5 Practical Applications	293
6.5.1 To Associations of Women Entrepreneurs	293
6.5.1.1 Feminist Writings Reading Group	293
6.5.1.2 Workshops of Reimagining Motherhood/Womanhood/ Family Balance	294
6.5.1.3 Workshop of Identifying Women Role Models.....	295
6.5.1.4 Sharing Stories about Successful Women Entrepreneurs	295
6.5.1.5 Discussion on Competing Discourses.....	296
6.5.2 To Policy and Rule Makers.....	296
References.....	298
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (English Version)	326
Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Chinese Version).....	328
Appendix C: Informed Consent	330
Appendix D: Exempt Certification	334
Appendix E: Recruitment Letter.....	336

List of Tables

Table 1. Bridging SMI and RDT	74
Table 2. Study Participants	93
Table 3. RQ1 Findings Overview (Parts 1 to 3)	113
Table 4. RQ2 Findings Overview (Parts 1 to 6)	1910
Table 5. Review of Findings.....	280

Abstract

Despite the number of women entrepreneurs on the rise globally, the business world and the identity of the entrepreneur remain to be normed masculine and male gender stereotyped. This male gender stereotyping situates women who practice entrepreneurship in disadvantages, limiting their access to resources on which they depend to make meaning of their activities and identities. This imbalanced masculine gender order also manifests in China's economy. Women entrepreneurs in China face complex contradictions and challenges when navigating an arena that privileges men and masculinity. However, not much is known about the micro-dynamics of Chinese women's entrepreneurial experiences in light of China's sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts. My dissertation, therefore, takes a discourse-oriented approach to explore 34 Chinese women entrepreneurs' meaning making of their gender and work identities, by delving into their storied experiences. This project draws upon the structural model of identification to consider identification as situated action and builds on the framework of relational dialectics theory (RDT) to investigate the dynamic patterns of discursive struggles. The two research questions informed by these perspectives are: (1) What and where do competing discourses activate the meaning of "woman entrepreneur" as Chinese women entrepreneurs talk about their working lives? (2) In what ways do competing discourses engage in interplay, and how do women entrepreneurs move/act through the interplay of discourses? A contrapuntal analysis made of thematic analysis and a type of discourse analysis revealed two overarching themes of competing discourses that activated participants' working lives, including the discourse of misalignment (DOM) and the discourse of integration (DOI). Participants'

narratives also illuminated specific patterns of how dynamic relations between competing discourses were (re)produced in dialogue, as well as how relations of discourses shaped specific practices in dialogue. Ultimately, this project contributes to ongoing calls in communication and across disciplines, such as critical family and interpersonal communication research and intersectional feminist organizational communication research. It also extends RDT both theoretically and contextually.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Entrepreneurship is culturally and historically (re)produced in the expansion and accumulation of capital, playing a vital role in the ebbs and flows of the economy and thus the progression of society (Baumol & Strom, 2007; Landes et al., 2010). Indeed, organizations created by entrepreneurs constitute the building blocks of modern capitalist societies (Aldrich & Martinez, 2003). Entrepreneurial phenomena have, therefore, attracted interdisciplinary attention. There are many ways to understand the concepts of entrepreneurship. For example, entrepreneurship as a concept is broadly associated with “entrepreneur, business owner, and self-employed” (Orser et al., 2011, p. 563) and other synonyms labeling a type of occupational identity that intersects and interacts with other organizational identities. It is also linked to various interacting foci of entrepreneurial activity, such as participating in economic exchange, discovering opportunities, building-maintaining social capital and social networks, and partaking in cultural construction (Thornton et al., 2011). From a structurational lens embedded in social constructionism, Anderson and Starnawska (2008) conceptualize entrepreneurship as “an interactional phenomenon” that emerges as agents (entrepreneurs) interact with contextual structures (organizations) comprising both resources and rules (p. 228); entrepreneurs (agents) not only act upon social context, but also transform (reconstruct) the context, “giving the structure a new meaning” (p. 227).

Increasingly more researchers across disciplines began to realize that entrepreneurial phenomena are gendered, that is, governed by and participating in the (re)production of gender norms on multiple levels (Bruni et al., 2004; Brush et al., 2019). On an individual level, persons

identifying/ed as entrepreneurs act upon gendered entrepreneurial norms in their own and others' expectations and self-presentations as business owners. In general, entrepreneurship is normed masculine and male-stereotyped. Critical organizational researchers observe that the entrepreneurial identity is intrinsically *made* masculine and is hence related to the *naturalized* gender category, "men" (Bruni et al., 2004; Gill & Ganesh, 2007). For one, popular discourse tends to associate "entrepreneur" with the image of men or regard related entrepreneurial activities as "manly" work (Hancock et al., 2014; Marlow, 2002). This male gender stereotyping puts women who participate in entrepreneurial activities in relatively disadvantaged positions. Women entrepreneurs face complex contradictions and challenges when navigating a space that privileges men, male, and masculinity. For example, privileging men and masculinity means that women are in a disadvantageous position regarding acquiring the venture capital and network linkages they need for professional advice and supply chains (Bosse & Taylor III, 2012; Treichel & Scott, 2006); privileging men and masculinity also means that women do not get as much credit for their work and are often located in smaller businesses attuned to home-based enterprises and feminine occupations, such as jewelry and home goods and services (Alon et al., 2011; Long, 2015). It is important to note that constraints upon women's involvement in entrepreneurial worlds differ regionally and nationally, while "woman," as Black feminist writers have noted, is contextualized and cultured, rather than being a monolithic category (Collins, 1990).

Sites of paradoxes, contradiction, dialectics, and tension¹ offer opportunities for transformation (Putnam et al., 2016), as people can resist, negotiate, and (re)produce meanings

¹ Putnam et al. (2016) drew from a wide range of organizational paradox studies to identify five interrelated constructs, including tension, dualism/duality, contradiction, dialectics, and paradox. These constructs all capture similar experiences and phenomena involving polar opposites that relate to one another in different ways (e.g.,

through agentic discursive practices. Despite the biased male gendering of entrepreneurship, increasingly more women have created their own presence in this traditionally masculine arena, growing stronger as individual and collective agents, thereby potentially reshaping/changing the (male) gendering of entrepreneurship. For instance, the number of women entrepreneurs globally is on the rise. According to The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2016/2017 Report on Women's Entrepreneurship, in the 2014-2016 period, 163 million women across 74 economies worldwide were starting businesses, while 111 million were running established businesses. Since the previous 2014 report, the "Total Entrepreneurial Activity" (TEA) of women had grown by 10%, and women's ownership of established business had grown by 8% (Kelley et al., 2017). This progress, however, does not negate persisting problematics. The issues of gender gap (e.g., greater likelihood of necessity motivation and lower growth expectation compared to men) remain as complex as in previous years, with regional variations (e.g., the rate of women's entrepreneurial participation decreased inversely related to the level of economic development in some economies), despite the reported "slight closing" of gender gap by 5% worldwide. Gender inequality and women's experiences in the entrepreneurial world continue to be prevalent issues concerning hundreds of millions of people.

Because of the embedded, complex, gendered, and cultural nature of entrepreneurship, scholarship on entrepreneurship takes multiple streams. Gill and Ganesh (2007) helped organize them by identifying two orientations reflecting different intellectual traditions. The trait-oriented literature focuses on the idea of "entrepreneurial self," which includes studies that tend to identify the essential personality traits, behavioral characteristics, and/or qualities that make up

interdependent; mutually exclusive). While often used interchangeably in studies, these constructs are nuanced. Specifically, "dialectics" may highlight the *ongoing dynamic interplay* or push-pull of *interdependent* opposites that implicate each other. These terms are used interchangeably in this dissertation.

the entrepreneurial identity. Notwithstanding the valuable findings of entrepreneurial phenomena that trait-oriented studies have garnered, Gill and Ganesh (2007)—building upon the arguments and observations by other researchers—articulated several interlacing issues regarding how traits-oriented research on women entrepreneurs may help perpetuate the biased gender assumptions about entrepreneurship that marginalize women in this space. For example, as Ahl (2006) has pointed out in her poignant criticism of the entrepreneur scholarship, studies aiming at essential traits and characteristics tend to focus on those that are historically and culturally associated with masculinity (e.g., autonomy, ambition), yet without realizing the preconceived biases in language and discourses. Traits-oriented studies on women entrepreneurs also tend to reproduce White- and Western-centric understandings as they accumulate upon a knowledge base that has excluded women of color and women from the non-West, often ignoring the impact of race-ethnicity and culture (Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Inman, 2016; Knight, 2016). Lastly, studies looking for essential traits/characteristics assume the notion of essential self and self-contained individuals, failing to consider the multifaceted nature and relational contingency of identities (Alvesson et al., 2008; Scott, 2020; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) as well as the ontological inseparability of self and other (Ashcraft, 2020). Responding to these issues, researchers have started exploring discourses of entrepreneurship as well as women entrepreneurs' lived experience shaping and shaped by these discourses (Ahl, 2004, 2006; Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; Azmat & Fujimoto, 2016; Williams & Gurtoo, 2011). This discourse-oriented vein of literature critically advances understanding of (women's) entrepreneurship by challenging biased assumptions and bringing in culture-context-specific findings (e.g., Long, 2015).

1.1 Metatheoretical and Theoretical Overview

Given its discourse-centered underpinnings, this project takes a “constitutive metamodel” or a communicational approach (Craig, 1999) to communication; that is, treating communication as the fundamental “constitutive process that produces and reproduces shared meanings” that enable social relations, through which other social phenomena arise (p. 125). Communication theorists who have contemplated about the connection of sociality and materiality drawing from new materialisms (e.g., Barad, 2003, 2007) have pushed this constitutive view further by (re)considering meanings beyond textuality and whose bodies come to make worlds happening through communication (e.g., Ashcraft, 2020; Cooren, 2020). For example, in discussing communication constitutes organization, Ashcraft et al.’s (2009) definition of communication foregrounds materiality and the distribution of agency: “Communication is the ongoing, situated, and embodied process whereby human and non-human agencies interpenetrate ideation and materiality toward meanings that are tangible and axial to organizational existence and organizing phenomena” (p. 34). In short, communication in and through its many forms and modalities is a generative process. This constitutive view underlies the revised relational dialectics theory (RDT 2.0) (Baxter, 2011) and the structural model of identification (hereto referred to as SMI) (Scott et al., 1998), which together form the theoretical framework for this project.

SMI is a theoretical model that appropriates Giddens’ structuration theory (ST) to theorize about identity and identification in organizational life. Understanding SMI requires a fundamental understanding of Giddens’ (1981, 1984) work. To sum up, ST is a metatheory that explains the constitution of social structure and systems reflecting the structure, as well as how social actors (agents) participate in the constitution through actions. The essence of ST is the

concept of the duality of structure, which comprises the following propositions: agents and structures are constitutive of each other. Agents (social actors) draw upon structure (rules and resources) to participate in social activities while simultaneously producing and reproducing social systems that uphold structure through social practices. Meanwhile, rules and resources concurrently enable and constrain agents' actions. ST also highlights the agency of social actors, referring to the people's capacity to act otherwise or intervene to influence the social process. Social systems regulate actions, but as recursive sets of social practices, they rely upon the agency of people (in this project, this view is to be complicated by sociomateriality); therefore, agents can potentially transform systems and thus structure. In short, ST postulates that people (agents) are not merely powerless subjects of domination, as domination itself relies upon people's actions. People thus can negotiate, resist, and transform power relations. In SMI, Scott et al. (1998) treat identity as structure and identification as systems (recursive social practices). Therefore, there is the duality between identity and identification through which identity enables and constrains identification, which simultaneously produces and reproduces identity. Additionally, multiple identities are linked to regions of time-space ordering (i.e., regionalization); that is, identity and identification are time-space contingent. Consequently, identity formation and identification expression are situated within social contexts that entail routine *activities* and physical properties (highlighting materiality and action).

RDT is a communication theory developed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) and then revised by Baxter (2011). RDT highlights the competing discourses (as systems of meanings) underlying people's relational processes through everyday talk, exploring "how the meanings surrounding individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use" (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). Based on Bakhtin's (1986) dialogism, RDT assumes human experiences are

organized linguistically through language use (the dialog) between interactants. The dialog reveals chains of utterances characterized by struggles of discourses. That is, any form of speech act (e.g., storytelling and conversation) always involves the centrifugal (dominant) discourses and the centripetal (marginalized) discourses. These discourses interplay (in different patterns) to sustain, negotiate, and transform power relations between relational partners, or stated otherwise, relational partners co-construct their personal and interpersonal meanings through interactions. Importantly, in relational discursive struggles, researchers can observe larger sociocultural meanings.

1.1.1 Theoretical Goals and Contributions of this Dissertation

The current dissertation identifies with the burgeoning discursive orientation that critically examines the contextualized discursive construction of entrepreneurship, as well as how such processes of social construction shape (and are simultaneously shaped by) individual experiences. A gender lens—recognizing gender as a social force manifesting on various levels (e.g., structural, systemic, interpersonal) to order (inter)actions—also frames this project (Ashcraft & Harris, 2014; Buzzanell, 1994, 2020; Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). In these framings, attention is directed toward gender difference, performativity, organizing, and social-cultural lenses that enable movement within and between multiple gendered layers within the entrepreneurial context. Such a focus on gender remedies prior work situated at singular levels and draws together multiple reasons for the continuing marginalization of women’s work to encourage the generation of multiple theoretical insights and interventions.

One more layer to this project is that it is situated in the national context of the People’s Republic of China (hereto referred to as PRC or China), as a way to enrich the still Western-centric understanding of entrepreneurship (also see Long, 2015). Women in China, enabled by

contextual factors such as education accessibility, enterprise reforms, and legislation changes, have also joined to lead the entrepreneurial movement², greatly contributing to the economic (and political) transition and development of one of the world's largest economies (Li & DaCosta, 2016). While China's thriving entrepreneurial economy has attracted many researchers, "detailed studies of the micro-dynamics of the entrepreneurial process, focused on issues of growth, finance and gender" have been scarce (Hussain et al., 2009, p. 138). Whereas China is an important site for investigating women's entrepreneurial experiences due to its cultural-historical-political-economic transitions (Welsh et al., 2017), research on "Chinese women entrepreneurship is still in its infant stage" (Alon et al., 2011, p. 3). With national imperatives driving entrepreneurship by women (and men) in China, such attention to the evolution of Chinese women's entrepreneurship with its obstacles and successes warrants further examination.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to contribute to scholarship on "women entrepreneurs," including the said lack of studies on women's entrepreneurial experiences in China, thus providing an alternative to the Western-centrism in current knowledge accumulation, as well as the male-masculine stereotyping of entrepreneurship, in most research. Ahl's (2006) discourse analysis on how women's entrepreneurship is studied in empirical research identified a weak and often biased theoretical base for research on women entrepreneurs, in that "preferred theories are congruent with and reinforce" biased gender assumptions (p. 606). More recently, Long (2015), in her dissertation studying the paradoxical work design process of women entrepreneurs in

² This claim emphasizes women's active participation in PRC's economic reforms and the development of its private sectors as its Reform and Opening Up has unfolded. However, Chinese women as well as women worldwide have always been integral to the entrepreneurial phenomena. For example, in the *Taiping Guangji* or The Extensive Records of the Taiping Era (Song dynasty), there are many stories about women merchants who served their local communities.

Denmark, China, and the United States, problematized “the lack of robust theoretical models that account for the tensions, changes, and complexities of the processes of the entrepreneurial career” (p. 24). More specific to the discipline of communication, Long (2015) called attention to the lack of engagement with entrepreneurship research in communication despite the unique insights (e.g., on career, organizational paradox) organizational communication scholars can offer.

My dissertation responds to these calls. I ground my investigation in Baxter’s (2011) revised RDT, which foregrounds messages, meanings, discourses, and relationality, and orients to the power struggle that characterizes meaning making. My RDT-informed inquiry is complicated and sensitized by SMI (Scott et al., 1998), which enables me to take a structurational stand that prioritizes neither structure nor agency but the *process* of the production and reproduction of social systems in which structure and agency are mutually constitutive. By SMI, the phenomenon of identity is multifaceted and dynamic, as identities emerge through while coming to shape identification, conceptualized as processual, situated actions through which people form attachments to some larger social ideals (about themselves and groups). I explore the ongoing, relational process through which women entrepreneurs in China come to understand and sense themselves within the context of their organizational life. In other words, I explore their entrepreneurial (occupational) identity through identification intersecting with other facets of their identities. Inhabiting women’s bodies while navigating an arena normed male-masculine, their experiences likely entail an ongoing negotiation of paradoxical, contradictory, and/or dialectical experience (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016), regarding how they understand themselves and their relationships with others (particular and/or general). I hence orient to the competing discourses/meaning systems

activating their entrepreneurial becoming, as well as the discursive practices they have adopted and created to make meaning of such a process. This application of RDT not only conceptually pushes its boundaries, but also contextually extends its explanatory force into a cultural context and linguistic system outside of the current Anglo-American focus. Aiming at a context where intersecting forces of producing identities (e.g., gender, occupation, class, nationality) is foregrounded, my project responds to Suter's (2018) suggestion for engaging RDT's contrapuntal analysis with the force of intersectional analysis. With RDT's critical orientation, I also join the critical turn in family and interpersonal communication studies (e.g., Moore & Manning, 2019; Suter, 2016).

Furthermore, this project contributes to several interacting lines of discussions in the field of organizational communication (and organizational studies at large) with the agenda to promote gender equality and equity. Buzzanell's (1994) classic article surfaced a lack of engagement with feminist perspectives in the organizational communication research, which limits our understanding of how gender shapes the interaction between different bodies within the context of organizational life. This call has since become an ongoing/evolving one, and *Management Communication Quarterly* relaunched this call in 2019, addressing evolving issues of gender, body, sexuality, intersecting other forms and ways of how domination and categorization are produced and reproduced (Cruz & Lindabary, 2021). My dissertation joins this ongoing research agenda, by orienting to "the tangled relationships among gender identities and hegemonic conceptualizations of career and personal life in the processes of doing and undoing gender" (Buzzanell, 2020, p. 256). Importantly, this project aims at identity construction that is materially contingent and consequential; that is, identification as enactment both depends on and shapes a co-presence that involves the materialized shapes and bodies of humans, objects,

locales, relations, and so forth (i.e., all kinds of bodily presence, Barad, 2007). Simply put, I investigate the “enactment of gender in in/equitable material and discursive ways” (Buzzanell, 2020, p. 261). This research orientation recognizes the concurrency of materiality and symbolism increasingly emphasized by organizational communication researchers (e.g., Ashcraft, 2020; Cooren, 2020), moving away from the materialist-idealist dualism (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). The project hence joins the growing new materialist theorizing that explores how materiality (i.e., bodies, spaces, objects, and overall a sense of presence) intersects with discourse to shape identities and organizational life.

This project also contributes to the literature on organizational paradox (Putnam et al., 2016). Putnam et al. has reviewed multiple intellectual approaches to study paradoxes, contradictions, and dialectics in organizational settings, including exploring the activities embedded in the routine practices and interaction processes that constitute members’ everyday participation in organizational life (e.g., working life; workplace interaction). The routine activities of identification are often integral to these experiences (Scott, 2020). Moreover, literature on women’s professional and/or career experiences across contexts (e.g., politics, engineering, business) has shown that women professionals often negotiate various forms of contradictory rules, logics, practices, discourses, and power relations as they participate in work (Jorgenson, 2002; Long, 2015; Pfafman & Bochantin, 2012; Tian & Bush, 2020), to make and remake meanings. A project that examines the dialectical tensions linking meaning systems that enable (and also constrain) identification naturally foregrounds paradoxes and contradictory forces. Additionally, Putnam et al. (2016) specifically recommended Baxter’s (2011) dialectical approach as a relatively new way to investigate paradoxical organizing for its four contributions:

First, its discursive orientation captures the human experience of contradictions and the need to create meanings in and around them...Second, the dimension of multivocality

formalizes the need to consider multiple readings of “the paradoxical situation here and now,” including incorporating voices of the past and future...Third, relational dialectics also emphasizes the dynamic interplay between contradictory poles, a unique contribution that departs from Hegelian thinking about dialectics...Finally...this perspective incorporates not just cooccurring tensions, but multiple, interrelated and even knotted ones. (p. 121)

In short, combining RDT and a structuration model reveal unique insights about paradoxical experiences and phenomena through orienting to both voices and routine (inter)actions of organizing.

1.2 Summary and Outline of Chapters

In the current chapter, the context and overarching metatheoretical and theoretical orientations of this dissertation are presented. With the subject matter being women entrepreneurs in China, I presented an overview on the gendered nature of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship’s importance to Chinese economic programs, and the contributions that a study of this nature could make by taking a different theoretical approach, namely relational dialectics. The following chapters build upon this introductory chapter.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review that aims to delve deeper into the issues, concerns, and critiques of the male gendering of entrepreneurship, including providing the contextual information germane to women’s participation in entrepreneurship in China. Then I review key conceptions of structuration theory to situate my project in its ontological position, which is also to be complicated by a version of feminist new materialism that emphasizes the sociomateriality of performativity. Furthermore, I unpack SMI and RDT to establish the theoretical framework that guides my research, followed by a concluding section that first bridges SMI and RDT and then lists my two research questions (RQs).

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of this dissertation. I provide a rationale for employing semi-structured qualitative interviews with a narrative focus as the main data-

gathering method. To address different research questions, this project employs both contrapuntal analysis (a version of semantic analysis designed for RDT) and a constructivist grounded theory approach (constant comparison) for its sensitivity to cultural and linguistic nuances and meaning construction. Following the chapter, I reflect on some episodes in my personal life that have informed my arrival at this project, as a way to perform my positionality.

Chapter 4 answers RQ1: What and where do competing discourses activate the meaning of “woman entrepreneur” as Chinese women entrepreneurs talk about their working lives? RQ1 is answered in a classic RDT fashion, in that two overarching discourses (4.1 and 4.2) in dialectical positions are identified. Each discourse is comprised of five sub-themes/sub-discourses speaking against their counterparts in the oppositely positioned discourse. In section 4.1, I present the culturally dominant discourse of misalignment between women and entrepreneurship. This discourse (made of five subthemes or sub-discourses) disassociates women and femininity thought to be inherently attached to them from the occupational identity of the entrepreneur and embodiment of this work identity. This section reveals rules and resources (necessarily discursive) of the identity of “(Chinese) woman” and identity of “entrepreneur” (structure) in their specific, nuanced forms, but also the troubled ways in how participants talked about the contested “woman entrepreneur” identity (identification). In 4.2, I identify five discourses/sub-themes that provide alternatives to those presented in 4.1, in which participants have discursively and practically moved away from a misplacement of themselves in the work-family contexts. That is, women (entrepreneurs) are no longer unfit bodies for entrepreneurship, and (women) entrepreneurs are no longer threats to family balance or harmony. Rather, participants have found ways to integrate their gender and work identities, whereby they became agents of change to the masculine, male-dominant entrepreneurial meaning systems.

Chapter 5 answers RQ2: In what ways do competing discourses engage in interplay, and how do women entrepreneurs move/act through the interplay of discourses? RQ2 has two parts. The first part of the question follows established RDT studies to identify the particular ways in which discourses interpenetrate (e.g., negating, hybrid), such that the relationship between discourses or meaning systems are established. The second part further considers the issue of agency, and more specifically, the co-agency of discourses and communicators. That is, in their structuration, discourses and their relations are created, maintained, and transformed through people talking but also make people talk in certain ways. The findings in the current chapter are based on the four dimensions of RDT, including nonantagonistic-antagonistic struggle, direct-indirect struggle, serious-playful struggle, and polemic-transformative struggle. In addition, drawing on my findings informed by SMI and considerations of sociomateriality, I propose and provide support for a new dimension, enacted-voiced struggle, that expands RDT's understanding of the features of discursive struggle to consider not only voice but also enactment.

Chapter 6 concludes the project by summarizing key findings and theoretical contributions. I further expound upon my findings in the remainder of this chapter as support for my claims of theoretical and practical contributions. To do so, I call back and juxtapose each subtheme/sub-discourse presented in chapter 4. I then discuss specific contributions to RDT, followed by a list that offers a quick view to all identified patterns, and I discuss how the project contributes to SMI. Furthermore, I identify seven themes of limitations that then point to future research. Lastly, I offer practice applications to members from associations (of women entrepreneurs) who helped me find participants.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter has four goals. First, I expound upon the issues concerning the male-masculine gendering of entrepreneur/ship, including how this practice may impact women's participation in entrepreneurship, as well as how researchers have critically examined the discursive construction of male-gendered entrepreneurship. I also provide information that helps to situate the discussion in the national context of PRC. Second, I establish the metatheoretical position for the present project by reviewing key aspects and fundamental assumptions of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, such as structure, agency, and the duality of structure and agency. Third, I build up a theoretical framework that combines SMI (Scott et al., 1998) and RDT (Baxter, 2011). I begin by presenting SMI and RDT separately and reviewing existing literature informed by or based on them. Fourth, I bridge SMI and RDT by explicating why they are highly compatible and the ways in which they complement each other.

2.1 Entrepreneurship Normed Male-Masculine

Despite social progress and feminist movements, evidence shows that entrepreneurship continues to be discursively and materially perpetuated as “manly” work, and the figure of the entrepreneur has been stereotypically portrayed as male/man (Bruni et al., 2004; Gupta et al., 2009; Hancock et al., 2014; Marlow, 2002). In short, entrepreneurship is commonly linked to the biological male body, “man” as a gender category, and conventional “masculinity” as performative gender norms. This assumption has been sustained discursively in different social spaces; that is, through the everyday talk of people, media circulation, as well as institutional knowledge production (Ahl, 2006; Gill, 2013). The media and popular culture reinforce this

gender stereotyping by primarily, if not only, featuring male figures representing entrepreneurs (Hamilton, 2013), such as “Henry Ford, Donald Trump, and Bill Gates” (Gill & Ganesh, 2007, p. 269). In academic research, some studies keep describing the so-called entrepreneurial traits or qualities (e.g., autonomy, aggressiveness, ambition) as masculine, without being critical about the biases and assumptions embedded in the language that they use to design their project (Ahl, 2006, further discussed later). These then are reflected in the popular belief that associates the entrepreneurial occupation with men (Hancock et al., 2014). For instance, Gill (2013) observed that in the United States, although the organizational archetypes, or “idealized manifestation of organizational identity, “have shifted away from the “organizational man” image, the newly emerged archetype epitomizing neoliberal entrepreneurialism still sustains organizational discourses that privilege White, masculine individuals and entities, while othering those that/who do not fit in these dominant categories. Through analyzing articles in business periodicals from 2000 to 2009, Gill partly attributed the emergence of such an “entrepreneurial man” archetype to the tendency to feature male figures and the privileged position of “traditional qualities of hegemonic masculinity” (e.g., strength and adventurousness, rationality and emotional control, and a public and patriarchal persona) in popular discourses surrounding entrepreneur/ship (p. 353).

This gender-role stereotyping of the entrepreneurial occupation (Hancock et al., 2014) stabilizes the patriarchal organizational structures and constrains the entrepreneurial involvement of individuals who identify (and are identified) as women in varied ways (Patterson et al., 2012; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). Common constraints to women’s entrepreneurship include social mobility, resources, networks, relational support, and legitimation (Driga et al., 2009; Gayathridevi & Phil, 2014; Jamali, 2009; Roomi & Parrot, 2008). Women may internalize the

biased understanding of entrepreneurship. Comparative studies have evidenced that, compared to men, women, in general, are less likely to aspire for an entrepreneurial career under the influence of male gender stereotyping of entrepreneurship (see Shinnar et al., 2012). Women also tend to think of themselves as less capable of entrepreneurial activities than similarly situated men even when social resources are comparable regarding accessibility while measuring themselves against stricter standards regarding competence (Thébaud, 2010).

Gupta et al.'s (2009) study on gender stereotypes in perceptions of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial intention using samples collected from the United States, India, and Turkey found that although female participants perceive feminine characteristics as important to entrepreneurial characteristics, both men and women shared a strong stereotypical view linking entrepreneurship and masculinity. Interestingly, this international study suggested that it is the masculine social gender identification (i.e., participants with higher self-assessment of masculine characteristics), instead of biological sex, that predicts a higher level of entrepreneurial intention. Nevertheless, women entrepreneurs may face the unique challenge of “social role incongruity,” in that they feel the pressure to both conform to the socially understood femininity while also performing masculinity associated with leadership and entrepreneurship (Patterson et al., 2012; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). In other words, they must *do* gender well to satisfy social role expectations while simultaneously performing in ways that conform to masculine constructions of entrepreneurship and leadership.

2.1.1 A Critical Discursive Orientation to Women's Entrepreneurship

Women's increasing involvement in entrepreneurship has motivated a proliferation of research on women entrepreneurs across disciplines. Gill and Ganesh (2007) “loosely” identified two scholarly orientations toward this line of research. The first one orients to traits and qualities,

“attempting to identify essential characteristics of women entrepreneurs” (p. 270). Gill and Ganesh contended that in traits-oriented research, the concept “entrepreneurial self” inevitably assumed the centrality of masculinity. For example, some studies have described women entrepreneurs as masculine for possessing traits like aggressiveness, assertiveness, determination, strong leadership behavior (e.g., Zapalska, 1997); while some others have concluded that women entrepreneurs displaying masculine qualities and behaviors were in a more advantageous position (e.g., Balachandra et al., 2013). Similarly, measures of “entrepreneurial qualities” often comprise qualities that are often perceived masculine (e.g., decisiveness, independence, boldness) without questioning the underlying gender stereotyping assumptions (Ahl, 2006). Granted, many of these studies did address the stereotypical nature of masculinity (and femininity); however, without taking a systemic critical stand, their findings can easily be reduced to assumptions that stabilize the male gendering of entrepreneurship. Furthermore, Gill and Ganesh (2007) argue that the trait-oriented line is “normed white,” building upon its tradition that focuses almost solely on White women’s experiences, which is then equated to all women’s experiences. False generalization as such has been widely criticized by researchers of color and/or international researchers for ignoring non-White and non-Western women’s experiences (e.g., Collins, 1990).

The second orientation takes critical perspectives, foregrounding the circulating discourses in the social-cultural construction of entrepreneurship (e.g., Ahl, 2004, 2006). This critical line orients to popularized and naturalized (male-dominant) assumptions about organizational and entrepreneurial phenomena, aiming to expose and problematize what has been taken for granted and to uncover alternative, often marginalized knowledge about social realities (Mumby et al., 2017). For example, Ahl (2006) analyzed 81 foundational academic texts that

informed women's engagement with entrepreneurship. This discourse analysis revealed how scholarship on entrepreneurship has helped stabilize a male-centered view on business and economy while recreating discourses that cast women "as secondary, as a compliment or, at best, as an unused resource" (p. 604). Ahl has further identified 10 academic discursive practices that perpetuated such a biased perception. For example, the first practice, "the entrepreneur as male-gendered," captures practices or strategies such as using words and phrases (e.g., control, strong-willed) that are culturally considered "masculine" to describe the entrepreneur archetype. Stereotypically masculine words are then used in scales measuring "entrepreneurial qualities." Though the central position of male entrepreneurs has been challenged by empirical studies in which no substantial differences regarding "entrepreneurial qualities" and "entrepreneurial performance" between binary gender groups are found (e.g., DuRietz & Henrekson, 2000; Watson, 2002), gender biases still prevail via discursive practices. For instance, women entrepreneurs scoring high on these qualities and especially those who are high-achieving and powerful women, are often described as "exceptions" parting from the expected secondary position of women (i.e., an assumed male norm, Ahl & Nelson, 2015). In short, popular and academic discourses of entrepreneurship alike tend to perpetuate the image of the entrepreneur as a male and masculine one, despite flaunting the idea of gender neutrality (Bird & Brush, 2002).

2.1.2 Women Entrepreneurs in China

Entrepreneurial phenomena are thriving in China, too. The PRC introduced its economic reforms in 1978, and its economic model has since then transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market economy with Chinese characteristics (Li et al., 2012; Welsh et al., 2017). The reforms opened the private sector, a forbidden area prior to 1988, and thus brought forth the rapid growth of entrepreneurship featuring private enterprises' dramatic development (Li et al.,

2012). It is beyond the scope of the current project to investigate the details about the drivers of entrepreneurship in PRC or how entrepreneurs drive the Chinese economy in detail.

Nevertheless, entrepreneurship, in general, is positively related to the growth of PRC's market-driven economy, while the flourishing market economy provides abundant entrepreneurial opportunities to men and women alike (Li & DaCosta, 2016). As established in the previous chapter, although researchers note PRC's economy as one of the most important sites for investigating women's entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial experiences, research efforts in this context remain underdeveloped and there is much yet to be learned about women entrepreneurs in China, especially on an individual level (Alon et al., 2011; Welsh et al., 2017).

Compared to international studies, a few existing studies on Chinese women entrepreneurs have reported more optimistic results or have framed their interpretation of data more optimistically. A study by Li and DaCosta (2016) on general entrepreneurial development in China reported quantitative findings based on data available from the Adult Population Survey (APS) conducted by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) in 2009. Li and DaCosta claimed that “[t]he male-dominance in entrepreneurial activities has gradually declined” (p. 159) as 51.2% of the respondents who identified as entrepreneurs in China were men while 48.8% were women, indicating a small gender gap. Additionally, women in the APS 2009 data were more likely to start a business than men, “quite a contrast to the historical trend in China” (p. 166). In a study on *social entrepreneurship* in China, Warnecke (2018) reported that the estimated percentage of women-led social enterprises is 42-45%, although the reported estimation of women entrepreneurs' overall ratio (25%) weakened Li and DaCosta's argument of a small gender gap. Moving beyond statistical comparison, Hussain et al.'s (2009) study concluded that women and men who were owners of small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

had “equal” access to the interrelated finance and *guanxi* (a social capital-based resource that often determines one’s social mobility in China) and “women entrepreneurs in China appear to have been on an upward trajectory” (p. 138). In another study (Xu et al., 2018) on rural women’s involvement in rural tourism entrepreneurship, researchers identified five dimensions (i.e., physical and mental health, cultural literacy, participation in public affairs, living environment, and self-value) of poverty alleviation enabled by these women’s entrepreneurial practices.

Nevertheless, gendered socio-cultural and economic factors still complicate these optimistic interpretations. On a grand level, Confucianism, the backbone of Chinese culture, has been historically made patriarchal, constraining women’s social mobility and confining them to domesticity or “the inside/*nei*” of the family homes (Gao, 2003). By such an order, Chinese women have been symbolically and practically disassociated from the realms of public affairs, social production, personal fulfillment, and political officialdom, known as “the outside/*wai*” (Rosenlee, 2006). On a related note, historically and culturally constructed family values impact women’s entrepreneurship. For example, Welsh et al.’s (2017) study found a significant association between the subjective understanding of work-family balance and Chinese women entrepreneurs’ firm performance. Another study by Yu (2011) suggested that Chinese women’s heavy family responsibilities may be attributable to their limited development of social networks or *guanxi* and thus lowered access to financial and technical resources. This conflicted relation between family and social network could be an obstacle considering a study by Yueh (2009) on entrepreneurial drivers found that *guanxi*, along with push factors such as unemployment, significantly influence Chinese women’s entrepreneurial probability. The same study also reported that in China, “entrepreneurs are more driven, motivated, more likely to be male, younger, fewer are Party members, and tend to start a business with relatives” (p. 23). More

specific studies also reported contradicting results. According to Alon et al. (2011), women in China tend to initiate their entrepreneurship from industries with “low barriers to entry, such as the textile industry, restaurants, or other services requiring unsophisticated skills or small amounts of capital” (p. 24). Li and DaCosta (2016) deemed women’s service-oriented involvement in entrepreneurship advantageous as the service industry is thriving due to the sectorial shift. This view, however, is challenged by the fact that the economic reforms have undermined women’s occupational opportunities in light- and service-industries that are traditionally occupied by women (Tan, 2008). Tan has also observed the resurgence of male-dominant *guanxi* networks and structures that tend to marginalize women from the PRC’s labor market (such as gendered discrimination in hiring/layoffs).

Evidence underpins the significance of cultural influence on women’s entrepreneurship in the PRC (Welsh et al., 2017; Yu, 2011). But existing literature does little to illuminate how culture shapes women entrepreneurs’ lived experience. Culture, discourse, structure, and subjectivity are inseparable constructs (Mumby et al., 2017; Weick, 1995). An investigation on discourses surrounding women entrepreneurship and women entrepreneurs’ lived experience fills this gap.

2.2 Ontological Positioning: Structuration Theory

The theory of structuration, or structuration theory (ST), is an ontological theory that sociologist Anthony Giddens has developed, which has come in its full shape in *The Constitution of Society* (Giddens, 1984). Though not without criticism, ST still stands as a pillar in social sciences, and its influence has extended beyond the academy to shape policies (Bryant & Jary, 1991). Giddens’ ST responded critically to the ontological division between different intellectual traditions (mainly, functionalism and structuralism versus hermeneutic traditions) at the time

concerning social structure and agency. Taking a new structuration stand that highlights the duality between social structures and human activities, Giddens (1984) observes, “What is at issue is how the concepts of action, meaning and subjectivity should be specified and how they might relate to notions of structure and constraint” (p. 2). ST explains how society is constituted via human interactions and how systems and structures constrain and enable social practices (or human conduct). ST also links the micro-meso-macro levels of social organizing.

2.2.1 Structure and System

Giddens (1979, 1984) deems the prominent conceptualizations on “structure (or social structure)” in either the functionalist tradition or the post-/structuralist tradition inadequate to social sciences. The former treats structure as some objective, external (outside human actions) “‘patterning’ of social relations or social phenomena” (or “patterning of presences”) that pose constraints upon “the free initiative of the independently constituted subject” (Giddens, 1984, p. 16); the latter, on the other hand, understands structure as “an intersection of presence and absence,” transcending “surface manifestations” (p. 16). While Giddens views the structuralist conception of structure as being “more interesting” than the functionalist one (which has been used naively as a received notion), he also recognizes the “ambiguity over whether structures refer to a matrix of admissible transformations within a set or to rules of transformation governing the matrix” (p. 17) in structuralist writings. Giddens thus adapts these inadequate, confusing conceptions of structure by differentiating “structure” and “system.” Briefly, in ST, structure is abstract or “*virtual*” whilst system is concrete (instantiating structural features). Structure in ST is understood as *rules and resources* on which social actors can draw when recursively participating in the *production and reproduction* of (different levels of) social systems (Giddens, 1984):

Structure thus refers, in social analysis, to the structuring properties allowing the “binding” of time-space in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them “systemic” form. To say that structure is a “virtual order” of transformative relations means that social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have “structures” but rather exhibit “structural properties” and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents. (p. 17)

Specifically, structural properties are social systems’ “institutionalized features, giving ‘solidity’ across time and space” (p. 24), or they are patterned “chronically reproduced features” of social relations (p. 288) that are “both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (p. 25). Giddens situates social systems within the “syntagmatic dimension” of social relations, referring to “the patterning of social relations in time-space involving the reproduction of situated practices” (p. 17). Theorists applying ST understand social systems as observable patterns of relationships recursively produced and reproduced in and through situated social practices, whose scope is reflected in the time-space binding (Haslett, 2011; Poole & McPhee, 2004). Structures, according to Giddens, are virtual orders that can only be instantiated in social practices.

2.2.2 Rules and Resources

Structures are sets of rules and resources on which agents can draw to take action. Poole and McPhee (2004), in their narrations of ST, state, “A rule is any principle or routine that guides people’s actions” (p. 174). This interpretation, however, might have oversimplified Giddens’ conceptualization. Indeed, rules in ST are “not equivalent to habit or routine” as in “[a]s a rule R gets up at 6.00 every day” (Giddens, 1984, p. 19). Though acknowledging the critical role that routines and habits play in social life (thus in practices, and thus production and reproduction of society), Giddens stresses that these habitual rules are not what constitute structures (i.e., they are not structural rules), as they do not “usually presuppose some sort of underlying precept that the

individual is following or any sanction which applies to back up that precept” (p. 19). Giddens also gives two other examples of rules (rules governing chess game and rules regulating workers’ performance) that reflect two important aspects of—but not yet are—structural rules. The two aspects are “the constitution of meanings” and the “close connection with sanctions [of activities and practices]” (p. 19). The “rules” that constitute structure are those that are formulated, easily recited/uttered, and taken-for-granted (not requiring understanding). These rules “of social life” are generalizable to a range of contexts and occasions, serving “as techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices” (p. 21). Giddens uses linguistic rules to exemplify such rules. Language, indeed, exemplifies the structuration process; everyday use (practice) of language by actors entails drawing upon linguistic rules (*enabling*) and reproducing the rules; however, words sometimes mean too little, *constraining* actors’ expression (Haslett, 2011; Kaspersen, 2000). ST concerns rules “locked into the reproduction of institutionalized practices, that is, practices most deeply sedimented in timespace” (Giddens, 1984, p. 22). Some rules are “intensive,” “tacit,” “informal,” and weakly sanctioned, which are more embedded in everyday *practices* (e.g., turn-taking in conversation); whereas some others are “shallow,” “discursive,” “formalized,” and “strongly sanctioned” (e.g., law), which present an *interpretation of procedures of actions*. Giddens is more interested in the formal groups of every day, tacit rules, as ST itself is an action theory that orients more to practices.

Poole and McPhee (2004) interpret resource as “anything people are able to use in action, whether material (money, tools) or nonmaterial (knowledge, skill)” (p. 174). Resource in ST orients to signification and legitimation (or meanings and norms, see below on “modalities”), and essentially, power relations in interactions and thus the process of structuration (Giddens, 1984). To Giddens, the exercise of power via mobilization of resources characterizes all action.

In other words, resources “are media through which power is exercised, as a routine element of the instantiation of conduct in social [production] and reproduction” (p. 16). Moreover,

Domination depends upon the mobilization of two distinguishable types of resource. Allocative resources refer to capabilities – or, more accurately, to forms of transformative capacity – generating command over objects, goods or material phenomena. Authoritative resources refer to types of transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors. (p. 33)

Thus, allocative resources concern “control over material resources” and the materiality of social constitution, such as raw materials and land, whereas authoritative resources concern “control over coordination in organizing,” such as the ordering of time-space and people relating (Haslett, 2011, p. 123).

2.2.3 The Duality of Structure

The concept of the duality of structure is crucial to ST (Giddens, 1984), and Poole and McPhee (2004) deem it the “central idea” of the theory, linking “the production of social interaction, conducted by knowledgeable agents, with the production of social systems across time and space” (Kaspersen, 2000, p. 43). ST does not treat the constitution of agents and structures as dualism, or independent sets of social phenomena, but as a dual process, as “we draw on structural rules and resources to act within a social system of practices, we also keep that system going...we reproduce the system and its structure” (Poole & McPhee, 2004, p. 175).

In other words, while being constituted as agents via participating in the production and reproduction of social systems, we sustain and transform systems and their structural features.

The concept of the duality of structuration also postulates that structure is simultaneously constraining and enabling (Giddens, 1984, 1979), which again foregrounds power. Indeed, power is essential to one of the three dimensions (i.e., domination) of structure, according to ST (Haslett, 2011). According to Haslett, “Agents are able to use a range of powers, including that

of influencing the actions of others. The duality of structure captures this view of power as the capacity to achieve an intended end” (p. 130). Furthermore, the concept of the duality of structure recognizes that some “structured properties of social system” do expand across time and space, going beyond individual control (Giddens, 1984, p. 26), and that actors’ social activities and understandings of social reality do reify such systems. Nevertheless, ST also stresses that “[e]ven the crudest forms of reified thought, however, leave untouched the fundamental significance of the knowledgeableability of human actors,” for actors’ knowledge that emerges through their participation in social activities “is not incidental to the persistent patterning of social life but is integral to it” (p. 27). That is, insofar as actors recursively produce and reproduce systems, their knowledgeableability preserves. This understanding of social actors or agents highlights “agents’ reasons—the rationalization of action as chronically involved in the structuration of social practices” (p. 27). In this sense, agents are no longer treated as unconscious or ignorant beings organized by systems. Importantly, Giddens also disagrees with regarding society as “the plastic creation of human subjects,” which alludes to “pre-constituted actors somehow come together” to create systems and societies (p. 27). It is always a structural process of duality; that is, ST no longer concerns whether systems and structures proceed agents or vice-versa. They are co-constitutive.

2.2.4 Modalities and Dimensions of Structure

In social life, actors/agents draw on rules and resources to produce and reproduce social systems (as recursive social practices) via appropriating structural features or properties in *interaction*. In this process, *modalities* are what conceptually link interaction with structure. Giddens (1984) identifies three dimensions of structure, including *signification*, *domination*, and *legitimation*. Because agents draw upon structure (rules and resources) to produce and reproduce

social systems in their everyday interaction, there are also three corresponding dimensions on the interactional/interpersonal level of social practices, including *communication* (of meanings), *power*, and *sanction* (pertinent to morals) (Haslett, 2011). Giddens notes that the division of these dimensions, in structure and interaction, is purely analytical. In any social system (exhibiting structure properties) and human interaction, these dimensions intertwine with one another:

If signification is fundamentally structure in and through language, language at the same time expresses aspects of domination; and the codes that are involved in signification have normative force. Authorization and allocation are only mobilized in conjunction with signifying and normative elements; and, finally, legitimation necessarily involves signification as well as playing a major part in co-ordinating forms of domination. (Giddens, 1979, p. 107)

More importantly, Giddens (1984) conceives of “modalities” of structuration—including *interpretive scheme*, *facility* (alluding to allocation and authorization), and *norm*—to link the two levels of social practices and to articulate the duality of structure. He explains, “Actors draw upon the modalities of structuration in the reproduction of systems of interaction, by the same token reconstituting their structural properties” (p. 28). Haslett’s (2011) interpretation help clarifies:

The modality of interpretative schemes connects communication with signification; facilities connect power with domination; and norms connect sanctions with legitimation. All aspects of both levels are simultaneously present in every interaction. As such, competent agents apply interpretive schemes appropriate to the context in which they are operating, and mobilize facilities [allocative and authoritative resources] that they have access to in order to accomplish their purposes. Finally, agents apply sanctions to maintain actions they deem legitimate in a given context. (p. 103)

In short, modalities mediate the structural features and agents’ interaction. That is, to communicate meanings, we draw upon the structure of signification via interpretive schemes; to exercise power, we draw upon the structure of domination via facilities; to sanction behaviors, we draw upon the structure of legitimation via social norms.

2.2.5 Agent, Agency, and Power

It should be clear by now that Giddens' ST refers to social actors as agents, individuals, and groups who interact to produce and reproduce systems through social practices and thus sustain and transform systems and structures. In their everyday process of structuration (action), agents continuously engage in the "reflexive monitoring of activity" involving the social conduct of themselves as well as that of the others (Giddens, 1984, p. 5). Reflexivity is critical to the concept of agent and system production and reproduction:

It is the specifically reflexive form of the knowledgeability of human agents that is most deeply involved in the recursive ordering of social practices. Continuity of practices presumes reflexivity, but reflexivity in turn is possible only because of the continuity of practices that makes them distinctively 'the same' across space and time. 'Reflexivity' hence should be understood not merely as 'self-consciousness' but as the monitored character of the ongoing flow of social life. (p. 3)

Critical to this process is the routinization of social practices, which helps sustain actors' ontological security or the "confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity" (p. 375). Additionally, according to ST, social conduct here captures "the flow" of agents' activities in which they engage in the structuration process. Furthermore, Giddens (1984) maintains that agents/actors not only constantly monitor activities of their own and of the others but also "routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move" (p. 5). "Context" in Giddens' narration works elastically for a variety of constructs with varying levels of abstraction, such as "social life," "interaction," "time-space," and "social activity."

In ST, the notion of reflexive monitoring of action is also linked to "rationalization" and "motivation" of action. By rationalization, Giddens means "that actors...routinely...maintain a continuing 'theoretical understanding' of the grounds of their activity" (p. 5). This theoretical understanding came from their daily participation in social production and reproduction via

social practices. Maintaining it is part of the processes through which the consciousness is constituted. Giddens also notes that this understanding is not necessarily discursive or that such understanding entails neither “the discursive giving of *reasons* for particular items of conduct” nor “the capability of specifying such reasons discursively” (p. 6, my emphasis). This point is important to note as ST foregrounds practices, actions, and materiality (Poole & McPhee, 2004). However, the separation between discursivity and materiality—rather limiting view of either concept—has been challenged by new materialism or considerations of sociomateriality (Cooren, 2020; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015), which is to be discussed in a later section. Nevertheless, competent agents are usually expected to be able to provide reasons for their actions. By motivation, Giddens refers “to the wants which prompt” the grounds of action or reasons, and, importantly, “the potential for action rather than to the mode in which action is chronically carried on by the agent” (p. 6). According to Giddens, unlike reflexive monitoring and rationalization, motivation’s link to “continuity of action” and reflexivity is not as direct, providing “overall plan or programmes” that encapsulate enacted conduct (p. 6). In Giddens’ writing, motivation connects more to unconsciousness.

Furthermore, Giddens identifies three levels of consciousness of actors, including practical consciousness, discursive consciousness, and unconsciousness, critically adapted from psychoanalysis. Giddens (1984) highlights the concept of practical consciousness as being fundamental to ST, considering, again, systems and structures are produced and reproduced through social practices. Practical consciousness refers to “the knowledge and skills that we can’t put into words but use in action” (Poole & McPhee, 2004, p. 176) or things we know how to operate but cannot explain. By contrast, discursive consciousness “refers to things we can put into words,” and when reflected in the structuration process, “we are aware of some rules and

resources in such a way that we can express and explain them to others and use them to give an account of our actions” (p. 176). Knowledgeability is reflected on these two levels of consciousness, although more so on the practical than on the discursive. Importantly, Giddens does not draw a solid line between the two levels of consciousness, as, indeed, “the division between the two can be altered by many aspects of the agent’s socialization and learning experiences” (p. 7). Unconsciousness, on the other hand, is separated from the two levels of consciousness. Giddens explains that unconsciousness takes “forms of cognition and impulsion which are either wholly repressed from consciousness or appear in consciousness only in distorted form” (p. 5-6). Routinization or recursive flow of everyday actions “curb” tensions rising from unconsciousness (Giddens, 1979, 1984), sustaining ontological security. Unconsciousness is thus important to the understating of agents’ knowledgeability (Haslett, 2011), as it orients to not only the daily routines but also the moments when disruption occurs, soliciting subjective meaning making (Poole & McPhee, 2004).

ST’s conception on reflexive monitoring of social conduct, rationalization of action, motivation, and consciousness (and more) all pertain to agents’ action, highlighting agents as knowledgeable acting beings. Action is also critical to agency, referring to the capacity to act otherwise or differently as well as “to doing” (Giddens, 1984, p. 10). As Giddens postulates,

Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place...Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened. (p. 9)

Agency also underlies the processual, ongoing, mundane social practices that sustain social systems, and it takes conscious and discursive reflection to foreground it (Haslett, 2011).

Furthermore, according to Giddens, being able to act otherwise or intervene (and refrain from

interventions) means that agents are “able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers” that change/influence social process and life (Giddens, 1984, p. 14).

In ST, “action logically involves power in the sense of *transformative capacity*” (p. 15, my emphasis). Power in Giddens’ language thus can refer to transformation, change, intervention, and it, too, is embedded in the routine social interaction—instantiated in action—amongst agents (Giddens, 1979). On a higher level of abstraction (in his language), power is involved in all three dimensions of structure (signification, domination, legitimation), and as shown in his model of modalities, power links to (and is important for) all elements of structuration. Social systems (varying levels), as displaying structural properties, exercise power, which is embedded in “regularized relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities in contexts of social interaction” (Giddens, 1984, p. 16). Integral to power relations, however, is the dialectic of control, as domination logically depends on subordination, and thus “all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors” (p. 16). Ultimately, the exercising of power is done via the manipulation (allocation and authorization) of resources (see above).

2.2.6 Time and Space

As an ontological theory, ST also captures the time-space complexity in social ordering. To begin with, time-space is fundamental to the conceptual separation between structure and system, in that structure is out of time and space (absence) while system binds or is reproduced across time and space (it has a presence) (Giddens, 1984). ST postulates that societies are organized around consistent patterns of time-space distanciation, or otherwise understood as “construction of new spatial-temporal arrangement” (Poole & McPhee, 2004, p. 180), displayed in all levels of social practices (through interaction). Different forms of society display varied

time-space distancing patterns. The example Giddens (1984) likes to use is that tribal societies are organized around low distancing, where interactions are face-to-face. Modernity, on the contrary, demonstrates high distancing, in that communication occurs in a time-space pattern with a vast range (enabled by technology). Social systems and practices holding up them have locales regionalized based on time-space patterns, binding time and space. Time-space orients researchers to the temporal and spatial factors in phenomena of social practices, as well as the sociohistorical contexts of production and reproduction.

2.2.7 Locally Determining Materiality—Sociomateriality/Agential Realism

Drawing from ST comes with the thorny issue of undertheorized materiality. Sewell (1992) located a “glaring problem” in seemingly contradictory conceptualizations of structure and resources, namely the undertheorized nature of materiality. On the one hand, structure (rules/schema and resources) is considered “*virtual*.” On the other hand, according to Sewell, resources in ST are inevitably “*actual*.” As previously mentioned, Giddens classifies allocative resources and authoritative resources, which Sewell correctly interprets as “nonhuman resources” and “human resources.” He then expresses his frustration over Giddens’ idea that these resources can be virtual, considering the materiality of nonhuman resources, which Giddens himself also discussed, as well as the embodiment of humans (who are resources), including affective responses to authority. Eventually, Sewell proposed to reconceptualize structure as “virtual rules” and “actual resources.” This reconciliation has provided a solution to many researchers interested in the usefulness of ST in theorizing recursive social practices (systems) but were perplexed by the issue of materiality, especially when sociomateriality has become a central concern in systems studies.

As a case in point, a study on the accountability of a health information system in Kenya (Bernardi, 2018) drew on structuration to study the recursive instantiation of the system but was troubled by the “undertheorization” of materiality and, therefore, the difficulty in incorporating sociomateriality. Bernardi thus shifted to Sewell’s reinterpretation of rules and resources. Another limitation that comes with Giddens’ account of materiality, which again is most clear in his consideration of allocative resources, lies in consideration of agency (Maller, 2015). Despite structuration highlighting the co-agency of structure and agency and, therefore, focusing on action and the point of emergence (i.e., doing) characterized by fluidity and movement, when the unit of analysis is individual, it creates the tendency of overemphasizing “the knowledge, capacity and responsibility of agents to effect change” (Maller, 2015, p, 57), thereby perpetuating a “blaming the victim” approach to social problems.³ This attribution of too much agency to human actors is exacerbated by considering materials as allocative resources that are means of power for human agents, but then ignore nonhuman forms of agencies (Maller, 2015). As a result, materiality in the original theorization of structuration is, as these critics pointed out, undertheorized.

To address this issue in the present project, I turn to Barad’s (2003, 2007) agential realism that considers materiality in terms of materialization (defined soon) and, more importantly, Cooren’s (2020) “different degrees of materialization,” while moving beyond the virtual-actual dualism. One consensus among different writers, including Giddens and Sewell, on materiality, is that it entails time-space presence/existence. On resources, Giddens states that:

³ A solution to this issue advocated by Maller (2015) in the context of health research is shifting from treating individual behavior as the unit of analysis to social practices of doing (performance) maintained by human and nonhuman agents: “Studying social practices instead of individual behaviour in empirical research on health avoids blaming victims and brings socio-technical constructions of health to light” (p. 54). This point is relevant to the present study because I, too, focus on recursive discursive practice.

Some forms of allocative resources (such as raw materials, land, etc.) might seem to have a “real existence” in a way which I have claimed that structural properties as a whole do not. In the sense of having a time-space “presence”, in a certain way such is obviously the case. But their “materiality” does not affect the fact that such phenomena become resources...only when incorporated within processes of structuration. (p. 33)

What separates Giddens and Sewell seems to be the very idea of existence (of resources, of systems) in the process of social interaction. By Sewell’s interpretation, “resources are anything that can serve as a source of power in social interactions,” in which the existence of resources precedes interaction. However, judging from the above excerpt and the idea that structure is constantly instantiated in the “doing/becoming” of recursive social practices, which structuration emphasizes, (allocative) resources may refer indeed to the relations wherein and whereby materials *become* resources, at the very point of emergence, contingent upon the ongoing process of being incorporated within the relations of structuration. In other words, the “real existence” and the time-space presence of things, people, and overall beings is only considered by their contribution to (and intervention in?) the recursive social practices that instantiate structure, which is why systems exist while the structure, referring to the process, only exists through systems. Structuration, then, seems to care more about *mattering* in and to relations of multiple actors (a relational ontology or that existence in and through relations) instead of the fundamental materiality/determinacy/exteriority of anything in and of itself.

This interpretation then enables a conceptual movement toward the materiality/materialization understood in agential realism (Barad, 2003, 2007), which also moves beyond Giddens’ overemphasis on human agents/actors recognized as a limitation (Maller, 2015). Barad intends to offer an explanation to the question of how matters are discursively produced (a Foucauldian notion) or the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomenon, which Foucault failed to answer, and also to extend Butler’s performativity.

Agential realism considers phenomena or relations as the unit of analysis and the ontological primitive or the fundamental of existence. The boundaries between components (and their properties) *of* a phenomenon do not preexist (i.e., there is no semantic and ontological determinacy). Instead, boundaries are enacted/performed in “intra-actions⁴” through which boundaries are locally established:

It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the “components” of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful. A specific intra-action...enacts an agential cut (in contrast to the Cartesian cut—an inherent distinction—between subject and object) effecting a separation between “subject” and “object.” That is, the agential cut enacts a local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy. (Barad, 2003, p. 815)

In short, it is through a specific agential intra-action that *relata* become locally determined and separable, through which the meanings *and* bodies of some “things,” “parts,” or “entities” (including “humans”) actively become intelligible to others (all within the specific relation). Such is the process of mattering.

The intra-active becoming of phenomena depends on apparatuses, which are ongoingly and embodied discursive practices (explained below) of boundary making, that enact agential cut to become/emerge as material conditions *of* the phenomenon that enable and constrain mattering (Barad, 2007). In other words, “apparatuses are dynamic (re)configurings of the world [i.e., rearrangement of relations], specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted,” whereby bodies of humans and nonhumans are produced (Barad, 2003, p. 816). Following Foucault, discourse in agential realism is not mere linguistic systems, written and spoken words, or what is said, but rather what “constrains and

⁴ “Intra-action/intra-activity” is the central idea of agential realism. Barad (2003, 2007) suggests the word interaction assumes pre-existing entities/*relata*/bodies; whereas intra-action is a fundamental rejection of this view to fully embrace the becoming of bodies and matters within a phenomenon/relation. It is indeed similar to the idea that communicators emerge through communication.

enables what can be said [and practiced]” (Barad, 2007, p. 146), as historically situated systems determining knowledge, meanings, bodies, and relations of bodies (Foucault, 1990).⁵

Furthermore,

Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements. Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities [that] is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity. (p. 819)

In other words, discursive practices are enactments of boundaries in terms of meaning making. Meaningful statements and talking bodies are ontologically contingent on and constitutive of varying social conditions. In short, discursive practices in agential realism are apparatuses in/through whose becoming specific (re)configurings of the world are enacted, producing locally determined meaningful boundaries by which bodies/entities/components and their relations are determined /differentiated. Importantly, because there are no predetermined boundaries between, for example, human and nonhuman bodies, all bodies are participating in the (re)configurings or (re)arrangement of reality into intelligible forms. This act and process of participating in the (re)configurings is agency. Discursive practices are therefore neither uniquely linguistic nor anthropocentric, accounting instead for all bodies’ enactments of differential practices and their agency.

It is through such a process that *matters come to matter*. Matter in agential realism refers not to passive “things” or “objects” with preexisting, fixed exteriority (i.e., out there) but rather is the intra-active becoming of things through enacting locally (within phenomenon) fixed exteriority or boundary (i.e., embodiment), which is inherently discursive. The materiality of phenomena is indeed materialized through the intra-active becoming of mattering bodies:

⁵ This conceptualization of discourse does not contradict Baxter’s meaning system, despite RDT’s focus on the linguistic enactment of meanings in human communication.

Boundary-making practices, that is, discursive practices, are fully implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity through which phenomena come to matter. In other words, materiality is discursive (i.e., material phenomena are inseparable from the apparatuses of bodily production: matter emerges out of and includes as part of its being the ongoing reconfiguring of boundaries), just as discursive practices are always already material (i.e., they are ongoing material (re)configurings of the world). (p. 822)

In sum, the materiality of a phenomenon is constituted through the enactment of boundary-making discursive practices, whereby matters/bodies come to matter. The relationship between materiality (matter) and discursivity (meaning) is that of a mutual entailment or entanglement (Barad, 2007). Because all bodies *come to* matter (not preceding the intra-activity)—to constitute phenomenon—agency is not a human attribute or property but instead an ongoing enactment⁶—the “doing/being”— “of iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad, 2003, p. 827).

Barad’s writing is highly interdisciplinary, but to researchers who study the social, she calls attention to material conditions or indeed what is materialized into mattering concerns by which bodies or identities are made intelligible (or rendered unintelligible) in the very becoming of these bodies. When the phenomenon of interest is indeed “human,” agential realism “enables (indeed demands)” looking into the “discursive emergence of the ‘human’” (p. 821) in the becoming of her body and subjectivity (neither preexistence nor end products) as well as how other forms of human and nonhuman agents participate in the contested process of differential constitution.

Recently, Cooren (2020) critiqued the tendency in organizational studies informed by Barad’s and other’s writings of sociomateriality to equating materiality with that which are

⁶ Or performativity, through which identities are formed and boundaries are produced. According to Barad (2003; 2007), Performativity is intra-activity, which extends from Butler’s (1999) emphasis on citationality (human-centered, linguistic acts) to consider multiple human and nonhuman actors/agents participating in the ongoing materialization of themselves and the phenomena they constitute. Agency, the act to participate in (re)configurings of the world, is therefore distributed among human and nonhuman bodies making up the (presence of) phenomenon.

“*tangible and touchable*” (e.g., technologies; artifacts) making up the organizational contexts, despite the vastly expansive view on materiality as well as the inseparability of materiality and discursivity (i.e., material-discursive) that Barad has pushed. Cooren attributes this tendency to Barad’s metaphor of “entanglement” regarding the relationship between matter and meaning and argues that it still suggests a separation between meaning and matter. Therefore, he suggests considering “materiality and sociality as (relative) properties of what exists” (p. 2) and that meaning must materialize to exist and materiality is *a matter* of degree. In other words, meaning matters (demonstrates materiality) through different degrees of materialization, “depending on the number of other beings that materialize its existence” to other beings (i.e., make it present, p. 3). Cooren’s argument extends from agential realism (Barad, 2003, 2007). From a CCO perspective,⁷ Cooren (2020) posits “the *irreducible materiality of communication* [used synonymously with ‘relation’]” (p. 6). That is, the communicational/relational process entails agents (nonhuman and human) *coming together to make a present* of other things or people of which they speak on behalf (e.g., the current condition of an office; a superior), a simultaneous representative and constitutive view on communication. In other words, anything (*including meaning systems*) exists *through* the communicating bodies that or who themselves matter or come to mean something in this relating. Critically, the relational dependency of beings/bodies (on relative agents) made materiality “a matter of degree,” contingent upon “the various forms of embodiments/materializations” (p. 16).⁸

⁷ Specifically, Cooren is a founder of the Montreal School of CCO who emphasizes agents speaking on behalf of organizations, therefore making it present in a certain communicative event (Cooren & Latour, 2011).

⁸ To illustrate his points, using the current study as an example, when an informant (a human agent) described for me a prospective participant, her business, and her address (note that three bodies are presented), her entrepreneurial identity might feel rather immaterial (low degree of materialization), only made present/meaningful by one agent (informant). However, when I went to interview the participant in her company, the whole place was screaming, “she is the entrepreneur!” The phenomenon (her entrepreneurial identity) was fully materialized by various components/bodies enacting a presence for the very phenomenon as they make themselves matter (e.g., her working

Revisiting structuration from sociomateriality, systems or recursive social activities/discursive practices materialize structure components (the very abstract relations of signification, domination, and legitimation) not only through reflexive social practices of human actors/agents but also the reiterative performances/enactments of boundaries and relations of all actors within different scales of relations/phenomena (e.g., a group, a company, an institution) in the very becoming of time and space. In this formative process, some matters come to matter as resources on which the very structuration process of a specific structure (e.g., the market economy; patriarchy) depends. Some others become bodies who/that mobilize these resources.

In the next section, I turn to unpack a specific model based on structuration by Scott et al. (1998). This model marries ST's key conceptions (e.g., the duality of structuration, regionalization) and social identity scholarship to theorize about organizational identity and identification as well as their relation.

2.3 Theoretical Framework Part 1: The Structural Model of Identification

The structural model of identification (referred to as SMI) by Scott et al. (1998) adopts several key aspects of ST to theorize about issues of organizational attachment, or more specifically, identity as structure and identification as systemic *situated actions* and how individual members navigate organizational life. Scott et al. understand that “the attachment process is largely symbolic and is shaped by both individuals and the social contexts of which they are part” and that “this issue of attachment concerns the linkage between an individual and some ‘target’ or social ‘resource’ based on perceived social memberships and the manifest behaviors [which] produce and are reproduced through those perceived memberships” (p. 299).

Therefore, identity is not an essential attribute of the individual self but, instead, a relational

employees; their slogan on the wall; her act of sitting in the CEO office). Even my visit was within the phenomenon of her entrepreneurial identity; therefore, I also became an agent of materialization.

phenomenon understood by associations among bodies (Ashcraft, 2013). While acknowledging the importance of other forms of attachment, SMI focuses on identification (as a form of attachment). Their definition of identification draws on Mael and Ashforth (1992): “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to [a collective], where the individual defines him or herself [or themselves] in terms of the [collective] in which he or she [or they] is a member” (as cited in Scott et al., 1998, p. 299). Thus, identification in SMI is a process concerning *personal meanings, individual-collective relations, and boundary making practices*.

Importantly, SMI reflects a discursive approach to identity (and identification) that cuts across several meta-theoretical lenses guiding communication research (e.g., interpretivist, critical, rhetorical, and feminist, see Larson & Gill, 2017), which “views identities as discursively constructed and mediated,⁹ investigates the relationship between discourse and Discourse,¹⁰ considers the role of power, treats communication as constitutive, and see identity and organizations as mutually constituted” (Scott, 2020, p. 209).

2.3.1 Foregrounding Intersectionality

SMI draws on “regionalization” in ST, which is about the binding of time-space, to frame the idea that identities are multifaceted, fragmented, shifting, and *situational* (Alvesson et al., 2008). They draw on literature informed by social identity theory to suggest that, first, individuals have multiple, *interplaying* levels of identities, such as “organizational, gender, class, occupational, ethnic, work-team, national” and more (p. 311), concerning individuals as socially

⁹ It is now also necessarily material.

¹⁰ A specific treatment of discourse in organizational communication. To clarify, “Discourse” (capital-D) encapsulates consolidated systems of thoughts and meanings in culture and broad (macro) organizing processes (e.g., a specific value an organization upholds); whereas the “discourse” (small-d) concerns the everyday, micro meaningful enactment of these systems such as a document and talk between members (Nicotera, 2020). The line between D/discourses is likely only drawn conceptually, and many researchers do not separate them. The linkage between them is indeed structural, in that living language is the activity that forms meaning systems that display structural features; meanwhile interaction (manifest as living language) is only possible because of larger meaning systems (instantiated structure). I do not consider this nuance here to further complicate things.

embedded/nested beings (i.e., matter both socially and individually, Ashforth et al., 2011).

Second, the self has dimensions (identities) “used to various degrees in engaging or disengaging at work,” corresponding to “different identification targets, or resources of identity” (p. 312).

These two propositions necessitate the consideration of (1) the intertwined power relations integral to the processes of the production of subjects and bodies being socialized into different categories and (2) resources made available or unavailable to certain bodies. This consideration reflects an intellectual and practical goal established by North American Black feminist theorists in their writings of *intersectionality*, which many intersectional feminist researchers across disciplines now champion. This project, too, aligns with this goal.

Intersectionality addresses the lived experience of persons in relation to the *interlocking* forces of domination-oppression that produce unequal categories that organize (even segregate) subjects/bodies in unjust ways (Collins, 2009). The power relations of these overlapping forms of social stratification also manifest in institutional practices (e.g., legal systems; Crenshaw, 2019). Intersectionality finds its origin in works of Black feminist theorists (e.g., hooks, 2014; see also Collins, 2009), who have cautioned White feminists that “woman” is not a universal category and that the gendered experience of women is not one, in that, for example, women of color and of lower-class experience gender differently from middle class, White women. Therefore, multiple forces of social ordering intersect to impact individual experiences and institutional practices; acknowledging and respecting these nuances is critical to the movement toward equality. Importantly, intersectionality seeks to illuminate the nuances of power struggles experienced by groups of bodies attached to different marginalized identities, aiming to foster *comraderies* and understandings among groups (hooks, 2014), thereby promoting equality (i.e., it does not aim at pitting groups against each other).

Intersectionality has become a powerful analytical tool, and pertinent research has moved beyond the gender, race, class mantra to recognize more forms of domination and marginalization (Yep, 2016):

intersectionality refers to how race, class, gender, sexuality, the body, and nation, among other vectors of difference, come together simultaneously to produce social identities and experiences in the social world, from privilege to oppression. (p. 87)

Or in short, intersectionality refers to “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Increasingly more studies have also revealed how race-ethnicity, sexuality, bodies, and so forth shape workplace identity performance/expression (e.g., Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Williams & Giuffre, 2011).

Intersectionality enriches Scott et al.’s (1998) discussion of multiple identities and multidimensional identifications by foregrounding relations—indeed, power relations—complicated by interlocking systems of producing and reproducing identity targets. That is, rules and resources for bodies aiming towards the same organizational identity (e.g., occupational, team) target vary, often greatly, depending on a variety of social locations in which they are embedded or the boundary making practices to whose force they are subject. Specific to the context of the current project, Chinese women entrepreneurs’ identity construction or their becoming might be subjected to forces different than American women entrepreneurs (considering nationality and gender); and further, the entrepreneurial experience of Chinese women’s from impoverished rural regions likely differs from that of the women from wealthy families in urban areas (for rural Chinese women’s experiences of migration to urban areas, see Jacka, 2015).

2.3.2 *The Duality of Identity and Identification*

2.3.2.1 Identity

SMI conceptualizes “identity” in ways similar to how it is understood currently by many (organizational) communication researchers (see Scott, 2020). This model answers three fundamental questions to the discussion of identity and identification (Cheney et al., 2014):

(1) the grounds for and resources of identity construction and transformation in contemporary global society; (2) the articulation and promotion of corporate identities by institutions and organizations of all sorts; and (3) the individual linkages to and bonds with organizations, industries, professions, brands, and other features. (p. 695)

A framework centralizing communication, it highlights the constitutive role of communication (as processual, meaningful exchanges and interactions) in constructing meanings as well as shaping the relationships among entities and the organizing of these relationships (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Craig, 1999), which includes identities at various levels (e.g., individual, group, communal). Identity is “elusive” in that it “cannot be established once and for all” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 303). In other words, identity is shifting and constantly in process, being produced and reproduced in interactions or situations of co-presence, often in dialectical ways filled with tensions (Alvesson et al., 2008; Kuhn, 2006). Meanwhile, *in ideal situations*, identity on collective levels provides members of a given category or group a *stable* sense of self, as Cruz (2017) describes “core identity” on the individual level as a set of enduring characteristics. However, “ideals” attached to seemingly stable, or natural, categories (e.g., “women”) are inherently contested and painstakingly maintained through recursive actions (ideals are hardly achievable; Butler, 1999). For example, in organizational settings, forming a *situationally stable* organizational identity is a labor-ridden work (i.e., identity work), entailing routinely reforming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, and revising the definition and expression of self (Alvesson et al., 2008). Despite its changing nature, Western popular discourse tends to promote

the ideas of stable identities and essential self (Larson & Gill, 2017), although studies have shown how embracing a multifaceted self and fluid identities can be empowering and advantageous in organizational life (Tracy & Trethway, 2005; Meisenbach, 2008).

Moreover, SMI underscores “the function of identity as an ‘anchor’ of the individual or collective self” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 303). They suggest that each “identity references certain *norms* and other *ideas* about who we are, how we are to act, and what is important to us” (p. 303, my emphasis). This claim indeed alludes to the three dimensions of the duality of structure, and thereby one of SMI’s central ideas; that is, identity is the structure, which provides meanings (ideas about who we are) and norms constraining (and enabling) activities. Additionally, per ST, domination and the ordering of power are implied in this relationship; determining and categorizing bodies and forming inclusions (and exclusions) manifest power after all (Barad, 2007; Foucault, 1990, 1995). The “function” of identity is summarized as such:

...identity is usefully seen as structure; that is, each identity constitutes a set of rules and resources that may be drawn upon by an organizational member. These identities not only help define who we are, but also provide us with the necessary resources we need to interact with others. (Scott et al., p. 303)

To further move their understanding beyond the cognitive view of identity, Scott et al. provide the following propositions about identity:

First, identity is constantly being produced, reproduced, and altered via external presentations of our identity. More specifically, identity is shaped by and revealed through discourse...Second, many aspects of identity may be institutionalized (e.g., roles) and thus located in places other than memory or cognition...Third, an identity may not be ‘recognized’ for or by a person until activated in a certain situation... Fourth, one can also treat identity as a feature of organizations. (p. 304)

These propositions are explained in their discussion of identification and situated activities.

2.3.2.2 Identification

In this structurational modal, identification is the system (as recursive practices; Scott et al., 1998). Identification,¹¹ therefore, instantiates identity in ways pertaining to time-space specificities. According to Scott et al.,

...identification is the process of emerging identity. Identification, especially as expressed in symbolic terms, represents the forging, maintenance, and alteration of linkages between persons and groups. Often made manifest in social interaction, identification in a structurational sense represents the type of behavior produced by and producing identity. (p. 304)

This description summarizes two important assumptions about identification: (1) it is processual by nature and therefore changing (while also situationally stable and enduring, Cruz, 2017) in the flows of social interaction; (2) identification and identity are mutually constitutive, or there is the duality of identity and identification (discussed later).

Scott et al. (1998) further stress that identification is a communicative process with a linguistic contingency, linking the self (including individual behaviors and actions such as decision making) and others with different degrees of abstraction in a symbolic interaction sense (manifested in memberships and citizenships). Therefore, identifications here are necessarily “situated in contexts of interaction in the presence of other social actors” (p. 304). Drawing on symbolic interaction (Mead, 1934) and Goffman (1959), Scott et al. (1998) argue that these others are always “‘present’ in symbolic form” (p. 305) and play essential roles in the identification development; identifications occur in “actual, hypothesized, or even retrospectively examined” interactions (p. 305). Simply put, even when people identify with a certain level of collectivity (e.g., group, community) in an isolated setting, such as when they

¹¹ Identification here focuses on human actors’ becoming of identities.

think about themselves in a private room, other specific or general social actors are present “in” their minds, and shape how they think about these individual-collectivity connections.

That identification is necessarily interactive alludes to the linguistic contingency of identification,¹² which is important to the present project. To Scott et al., “perhaps the most important indicators and expressions of identification are found in language,” emphasizing “communicative manifestations of identification” (p. 305) involving more proximal relational meanings and larger systems of meanings (Baxter, 2011). Thus, meaning construction and exchange are key considerations in identification research. Scott et al. identify communicative expression of identification, particularly “the story we tell of ourselves” (p 305) or personal narratives (including in conversational forms) as a primary source of investigating identification.

2.3.2.3 Duality

The duality between identity and identification builds upon Giddens’ (1984) duality of structuration. This duality hence is the essence of Scott et al.’s (1998) model. ST suggests that structure constrain and enable actions that produce and reproduce systems that display structural features (thereby holding up structure). Accordingly, Scott et al. suggest, the “duality of identity and identification accounts for the perceived linkage between (re)sources [and rules] of identity and our (re)presentations of identification;” such linkage manifests in “the appropriation of identities in the expression of identifications” that simultaneously produce and reproduce (e.g., “regionalize” and “unify”) identities (p. 306). In other words, while identifications draw on resources of identities or target identities, identities also depend upon different levels of identification actions *to exist*. Furthermore, the time-space contingent regionalization of

¹² This claim should not be contradictory to the idea that discourse is more than linguistic systems or that human experiences are linguistically organized, when identification here concerns human’s action of identity construction.

identities induces new contextual meanings to the identities perhaps ever so slightly, thereby transforming (reproducing) them.

In short, identity and identification are “products of one another,” and one more layer to this duality is that they “make sense of one another,” being meaningfully constitutive of each other (p. 307). To adapt the example that Scott et al. provide to the context of this dissertation project: She is a woman because she acts in womanly ways, and her womanly ways make sense because she is a woman. Although this illustration seems like a tautology, it speaks only to situations in which identity (i.e., structure) and identification (e.g., action at different levels) are readily integrated or when identification effortlessly conforms to identity. Countless evidence and arguments, however, have shown that identification or performing identities within a variety of contexts takes meticulous, everyday effort, for example: Black women professionals navigating a White workplace (Dickens & Chavez, 2018); “Trans*” individuals enacting and negotiating tensional identities concerning their gender and body (Wagner et al., 2016); inmates making meanings of imprisoned identities (Frank & Gill, 2015). The harmony between identities and different regionalized identifications is indeed a privilege not available to many bodies, especially those dwelling on the margins of social spaces and “walkers” across borders of meanings (Minh-ha, 2011). Ultimately, the duality itself is a contested linkage.

Scott et al. (1998) are indeed fully aware of the dialectics between identification and identity: “Although the duality of structure allows for this reinforcing influence, structuration theory also permits ironic appropriations of structure and unexpected consequences of doing so;” that is, by antithesis, identification also allows for “disidentification” (p. 307). A workplace example that Scott et al. use is that an organizational member may express a lack of identification with a work-team and the dissatisfaction with its practices by drawing on the work-

team identity. However, an organizational identity (a different identity region than a team identity) “loosely coupled with the work-team identity” may become salient as an “unexpected consequence” of the member’s ironic appropriation or disidentification (p. 307). This ironic appropriation of identities is also commonly identified in studies on professional women’s career experiences in different (male-dominated) arenas, usually involving professional women using situational strategies (e.g., muting gender; downplaying being a woman, see Hatmaker, 2013; Jorgensen, 2002; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015) to disidentify with conventionally understood femininity and femaleness (unfairly valued less in these contexts) (Buzzanell, 2020). However, some researchers (e.g., Medved, 2017) also suggest that these practices that seemingly conform to patriarchal norms are strategic, indeed reproducing gender identity in contradictory ways.

2.3.3 Regionalization

Scott et al. (1998) drew from the literature on organizational identification, attachment, and commitment to promote a pluralistic view of identification (i.e., multiple identities). They further identified four salient regions of identities in organizational life:

individual (personal interest that put the individual’s well-being above more social considerations), work group (e.g., team or department, where the interests of an immediate and interacting group are strongly considered), organizational (where the interests of the employing or primary organization are most salient), and occupational or professional (e.g., where consideration is made about the effects of one’s actions on their industry, professional associations, unions, or job types. (p. 313)

While these identities could “overlap substantially” depending on the contextual specificities, they show different levels and ways of contingency regarding individual-collective relationships as well as the meanings sustaining these relationships. These regions of identification, as they clarify, are not exhaustive, but they offer a good starting point for analysis and help flesh out the idea of regionalization of identity (structure). The idea of multiple identities and regionalization inform each other.

Regionalization is the “temporal, spatial or time-space differentiation of regions either within or between locales” (Giddens, 1984, p. 376). The term “locale” in ST references physical interactional settings with properties *enabling* “meaningful communication between actors” who share awareness of these properties (Giddens, 1981, p. 40); in turn, the associated activities or “typical interactions” *create and sustain* the meaningfulness of a locale. For example, a workplace is made of properties (e.g., office items; office technology) enabling employees’ work; it is a workplace because people engage in activities considered work there. Furthermore, regionalization also refers to “zones of time-space” or zones organized (literally “zoned”) spatially and temporally that constitute social practices (Haslett, 2011, p. 125). Actors interact with/in these zones drawing on, while also (re)producing, meanings of time-space. Haslett’s examples help concretize this relationship:

[A] home contains different zones, such as bathrooms, closets, hallways, den and bedrooms...some rooms are usually used at particular times, like bedroom...Artificial lighting also permits activity “24/7” which is characteristic of modern societies. Thus work zones may have day or night shifts; “flex time” may allow for flexible scheduling but also may accommodate times when everyone’s presence is required... (p. 125)

Additionally, Giddens noted the (changing) materiality of regionalization (i.e., the re/creation of locales and ordering of time-space). For example, technological advancements have changed how people move within and across zones of time-space and enabled the creation of spaces that are increasingly more complex (regions within regions).

Giddens (1984) identified four modes/parameters of regionalization (which is crucial to SMI). These include: (1) *form* or “the nature of the physical and/or symbolic markers that locate the region” (Haslett, 2011, p. 125) or “the boundaries that separate each region” (Scott et al., 1998, pp. 313-314) (e.g., rooms, ranks, sections); (2) *character* or “the time-space organization of locales which are located within more extensive social system” (Haslett, 2011, p. 125),

concerning the interrelated front and back regions; (3) *Span* concerning the size (breath) of space and time of regions, “with larger spans often associated with institutionalization” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 314); (4) *duration* referring to the length of activities sustaining a region, therefore also how long it lasts.

2.3.3.1 Characteristics of Identification

Regionalization is important to Scott et al.’s (1998) understanding of identity and identification for it “counterbalances assumptions about homogenous, unified societies” and supports the idea that “the various rules and resources available to an agent get regionalized, or grouped, into certain identities” (p. 313). Mirroring the four modes of regionalization, Scott et al. suggested four characteristics of the four salient identities in organizational life. First, these identities have *overlapping and unique regions*; that is, the links between/among these identities feature both “compatibility” and “competition.” Or, the links do not have to be “zero-sum” (i.e., while one becomes more salient, another one dwindles). Instead, organizational members develop various “corporate identities” that are “partially compatible and partially conflicting” (p. 314). Second, identities have *front and back regions*. To Giddens (1984), bodily positioning (literal and metaphorical) matters to activities. The front region before the body (individual to collective) is visible and public, thus susceptible to control and surveillance. In contrast, the back region behind the body is invisible and private (relatively), enabling actions deviate from norms (which can be a source of empowerment). Giddens’ concept of front and back regions shows the influence from Goffman’s (1959) notion of front and back stages as well as face (Haslett, 2011; Scott et al., 1998). In terms of identity and identification, the front region is the face we present in the front stage, reflecting ideal images reflecting “what is sanctioned and official in a culture” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 315). Front regions of identity therefore reveal “premises, beliefs, values,

etc., [what captured by the term culture] in line with other similarly socialized individuals” (p. 316). Back regions like the backstage are where “regressive”—inconsiderate, rebellious, unorthodox, and even profane—behaviors occur (Goffman, 1959). To Giddens, back regions can form “a significant resource that both the powerful and the less powerful can utilize reflexively to sustain a psychological distancing between their own interpretation of social processes and those enjoined by ‘official’ norms” (p. 126). In Scott et al.’s model then, back regions enable “disidentifications” or “negative identifications,” serving “as a way of relieving tension from the more tightly controlled front regions” (p. 316). Organizational communication studies have shown that back regions can be where organizational members engage in identity negotiation, resistance, and even the debatable micro emancipation (Mumby et al., 2017).

Third, identities have *size and position*. According to Scott et al. (1998), size indicates the importance of and “the number of features encompassed by” a given identity (p. 316). A fully socialized organizational member tends to have a larger organizational identity relative to other salient identities in the organizational life. According to Giddens (1984), institutions (i.e., more enduring features of social practices) occupy larger regions. Therefore, Scott et al. (1998) suggested that institutional identities “likely expand...to be among the largest of our identities as they are appropriated and reproduced repeatedly over time” (p. 316), even *becoming* natural and monolithic, like the binary gender identities and role-related behaviors attached to and required for these identities (Butler, 1999). On another level, *position* references the relative position of identities one another, offering a way of “conceptualizing which identities are central and which become more peripheral over longer spans of time” regarding the self (the self is still changing and multifaceted; Scott et al., 1998, p. 317). Importantly, identity size and position are not fixed (though they may stabilize), altered by the process of identification. Fourth, identities are

“characterized by [their] duration, or tenure” (p. 317; this again draws from ST’s time-space). Scott et al. “suspect that tenure, at least for voluntary identities, contributes to larger and more central identities over time...” (p. 317). That is, identities and attachments on which people spend more time to build, maintain, and manage become more central. Interestingly, this claim brought up a discussion about voluntary and involuntary identities. To them, “the identities with which we are born (e.g., gender, ethnicity, nationality) may have the longest tenure, but their involuntary nature may make them relatively small for many people in the absence of other influences” (p. 317). However, this assumption appears to speak from a position of privilege, in that it assumes situations in which the identity and identification concerning these involuntary identities readily integrate, or when identifications (expression, performance, action) conform to identities (and the structural features including norms, meanings, and facilities).

2.3.4 Situated Action in Sociomateriality

2.3.3.2 Situated Action

By regionalization, identification in SMI is “a more fluid construct” (p. 321) that is necessarily *contextual or situational*, contrasting to the prominent view of identity and attachment being stable in literature. This understanding further requires viewing identification from a “situated-action” perspective, by which Scott et al. “wish to highlight the importance of social contexts for identity formation...and for expressions of identification” (p. 321). Conversely, situations also emerge through activities constitutive of identification (the attachment process).

This situated action perspective, of course, is rooted in ST’s emphasis on time-space and, more specifically, the inseparable tie between social interaction (which re/produce systems) and time-space. The basic assumption of ST is that structure is instantiated in systems comprised of

recursive social practices *located in the context of time and space*. ST posits that “all social interaction occurs in time and space, and intermingles the presence and absence of participants” (Haslett, 2011, p. 126). To Giddens (1984), co-presence (of actors) is fundamental to “the ‘bracketing’ of time-space that is both condition and outcome of human association” (p. 36). Additionally, the context of co-presence changes as the ways/mechanisms of how time-space is bracketed evolve over time. Modernity and hyper-modernity, as Giddens observes, feature a “tremendous expansion of the time-space distancing of social activity,” thereby grants contemporary contexts great complexity. Consequently, identifications are also becoming increasingly fragmented and shifting.

Furthermore, “locales” and “routine activities” are integral to the contextuality of situations (Scott et al., 1998). First, “contextuality is defined largely by locales” or the physical setting for interaction, which is “*regionalized* on a time-space basis” (Giddens, 1981, p. 40). Therefore, identifications (in organizational life) are contingent on locales or physical settings making up a system (e.g., a specific region of the workplace). This emphasis on locales then also orients people to routine activities, interactive activities among actors that hold up these locales, which conversely enable the routine social life of members of an organization. The context of copresence and social interactions are mutually constitutive, in that context makes possible “gatherings, social occasions, encounters, routine interactions” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 322) that are all considered routine practices sustaining a context. Therefore, even contradictory routinized identity negotiation of members in an organization is part of the process that makes up the organization (Kuhn, 2006; Scott, 2020). According to Giddens (1984), this process of participating in routine activities of some sort, involving the copresence of others, is the means through which actors gain and maintain a sense of who they are, and ultimately a sense of

ontological security. Scott et al. (1998) therefore called attention to the people's routine practices in a given locale:

Identification is expressed via narrative and other behaviors in varied contexts, or locales, of social interaction, usually to those and with those who are copresent...that it is one's daily routines—and more precisely, one's activities—in a given locale that provide the context for identification. (p. 322)

This argument highlights the relational nature of and the material contingency of identification as well as orients to the routine practices of identification displayed through observable communication. Identification (whatever ways some level of entity expressing its attachment to another usually higher-order entity that are symbolic) is situated, drawing upon a certain context defined by recursive activities. Therefore, identification (necessarily communicative) is intrinsically linked to activities. In other words, the boundary between communication (conventionally understood as message, text, and talk) and action/practice becomes blurry; that is, communication is practical, while practice is communicative.

2.3.3.3 Situated Action as Boundary Making Discursive Practices

Lastly, considerations of sociomateriality again may help “reconfigure” the idea of situation in SMI, more specifically, clarifying what constitutes situation. Situation is a fundamental concept in SMI because identification is conceptualized as situated action. Scott et al.'s (1998) definition of situation is expansive, as they stated, “situations may be defined largely by activities-and it is those activities that can then be related to the attachment process” (p. 321) and further, “Only in particular situations, defined significantly by activity and activity foci, will a person identify in particular ways” (p. 323). However, it is their illustration of contextuality that made things a bit confusing. In conceptualizing identification from a “situated-action view,” they stressed that they “simply...wish to highlight the importance of social contexts for identity formation (though such contexts do not completely constitute identity) and for expressions of

identification” (p. 321). Therefore, it seems that situation is semantically linked to context. They then proceeded to explain contextuality, drawing from Giddens (1984):

Contextuality is defined largely by locales, which may range from a room or a street corner to the shop floor or a suburban mall. These locales are the settings in which “the routine activities of different individuals intersect” (Giddens, 1984, p. 119). Organizational life is likely characterized by numerous locales, such as one’s workspace, the cafeteria, customer sites, the assembly plant floor, the trade conference, the videoconference meeting, cyberspace, etc. It is true that organizations today increasingly operate in multiple places and are less tied to specific locations; however, this makes the notion of “locales” even more relevant to organizational activities, not less so. Furthermore, these locales both shape and are shaped by the content of people’s interactions. (pp. 321-322)

By this definition of context, situation by reference also was defined by locales. So, in short, situation is defined by locales that “provide the context for identifications” (p. 322). Now reconsidering “activity,” in a very long endnote, Scott et al. (1998) explained that they prefer to think of activity in the sense of

the social matrix in which one is embedded at a particular moment and point in space...including under this rubric such dimensions and terms as place, physical space, role, bounded practices, type of communication media employed, etc. Thus, our notion of activity would include the lay notions of the situated actions in which one is participating and would reference important *material aspects* of the experience. (emphasis added)

Their conception of “activity or situated action” captures

the importance of the context for and type of action being performed (e.g., the writing of memos, the facilitation of meetings, the conduct of performance-appraisal interviews, etc.) [and] the whole of a person’s role experience while performing the specific action. (p. 331)

They proceeded to explain that writing memos, as an example of an established form of organizational communication

would not only place the person in an immediate situation, through which she perhaps drew upon her identity as a professional manager, but would also place her within the rhetorical constraints for that genre of communication as revealed in the ongoing life of the organization.

This explanation seems to suggest, drawing from ST, that being situated means being constrained and enabled by the rules (and resources) instantiated in recursive practices (i.e., systems). This situation (pun intended) then requires either reconceptualizing situation and context as being defined by more than locales but instead the formative process through which locales become meaningful, or expanding the notion of the locale to encapsulate more than tangible physical and virtual locations (e.g., conference, cyberspace), what Cooren (2020) considered to be tangible and touchable forms of materiality.

It might make more sense to leave locale as it is (a sense of place) and instead reconsider contextuality not as “largely defined by locales” but instead, drawing from Barad (2003, 2007), in terms of the relations co-performed by bodies in their own becoming through acting boundary making practices of producing meaningful matters and situated action as referring to these discursive practices of creating boundaries and identities. This reconceptualization of situated action or activity indeed coheres with a rather expansive view of situation by Pervin (1978), that considered “*who* is involved, including the possibility that the individual is alone, *where* the action is taking place, and the nature [what] of the action or activities occurring” (p. 79, as cited in Scott et al., 1998, emphasis added). That is, in the ongoing process of relating, the determinacy of beings (who, where, what) becomes materialized or present to be meaningful. Considering situated action as boundary making discursive practices, rather than activity *at/in/within* specific locations (e.g., assembly plant floor), also avoids the risk of presupposing an existing locale for organizing (an existing organization), which contradicts the very core of structuration. This consideration is not to deny the physical location where organizing takes place, but instead to foreground them as active agents participating in meaning-matter

construction (organizing) in their own performativity, no longer as part of the mere background (Barad, 2003).

Ultimately, in this project, identities are considered not as individual attributes, but as collective goals or ideals made of rules and resources. In the dynamic, voluntary and involuntary process of attaching to these ideals, individually, depending on the specific forces intersecting to create their situations, are subject to control (while also being enabled) in diverse ways. Identity, however, also depends on identification, which is situated action that references discursive practices of boundary making (i.e., producing identities) within relations. The practices and agents enacting boundaries are constitutive of such relations (i.e., the relations are made of these discursive practices). Agency, therefore, can be attributed to any agent, practice, and relation (Barad, 2003; Harris, 2015). The next section turns to the second theory fundamental to this project (i.e., RDT 2.0), which provides specific ways to observe the tensional process of meaning making.

2.4 Theoretical Framework Part 2: Competing Meanings and Discursive Struggles

The revised relational dialectics theory (RDT 2.0) (Baxter, 2011) is a critical reorientation of the original RDT (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). RDT orients to “relational meaning making,” exploring “how the meanings surrounding individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use” (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). Appropriating Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) dialogism, RDT’s central tenet assumes that “meanings are wrought from the struggle of competing, often contradictory, discourses” (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). Studies based on the new version of RDT approach their relational issues or phenomena critically, exploring the how, when, and what concerning the interplay of competing discourses surrounding an object of thoughts, as well as the relational and societal levels meanings involved in the discursive

struggle. In short, RDT directs our attention to discourses embedded in relational partners' everyday negotiation of meanings (Baxter, 2011). Discourses are “systems of meaning” (Baxter & Norwood, 2015, p. 279) or “a set of propositions that cohere around a given object of meaning” (Baxter, 2011, p. 2) elicited from utterances through *contrapuntal* analyses.

Before further unfolding RDT, it is important to expound upon the relational approach to communication. This approach emphasizes the constitutive role of communication through (aspects of) human relating. This orientation, according to Berry (2016),

assumes communication is a jointly accomplished process in which people use linguistic and embodied messages to symbolically co-create, share, use, and interpret meaning within interaction and relationships. In this sense, communicators are interdependent beings who exhibit and draw upon their mutual influence. (p. 6)

Linking to the overall context of my dissertation, as communicators are “always already emerging from relationships” (Gergen, 2009, p. xv), the relational communication perspective sees an intrinsic connection between identity and communication (Berry, 2016). Hecht (1993) also postulated that “identity is mutually constructed in social interaction. In this construction, identity emerges in relationships and becomes a property of the relationship” (p. 79).

In *Bounded Being*, Gergen (2009) reflected upon and problematized the individualistic understanding of self in the Western traditions characterized by boundaries between entities and the independence (division) of individuals. Gergen thus endorsed the conception of “relational being,” which sought “to recognize a world that is not within persons but within their relationships, and that ultimately erases the traditional boundaries of separation” (p. 5). What he proposed—by illustrating the relational emergence of social worlds and beings—was to transform the naturalized culture of bounded beings characterized by separation, narcissism, and commodification of individuals into one that saw beings as relationally connected and

meaningful to one another and realities as caring worlds. In short, a relational approach seeks patterns of transformation through human relating.

Furthermore, a relational communication approach often foregrounds culture that underlies micro interactions and larger processes through which realities are communicatively constructed. From a holistic perspective, culture can be understood as

patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 86, as cited in Clyne, 1996, p. 2)

Clyne also read culture in a pragmatic light as “an ‘ensemble’ of social experiences, thought structures, expectations, and practices of action, which has the quality of a ‘mental apparatus’” (p. 3). Of special relevance to the context of the present project is that this pragmatic view of culture underlies Clyne’s exploration of cultural values in discourse at work (including workplace gender variation).

In addition, Philipsen (1992) has defined culture as “*a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules*” (p. 7).¹³ To unfold, that a culture is social construction highlights its transcendence beyond micro, individual interactions and meanings as well as its endurance in terms of time-space. It is also not “biologically endowed” or *more than* the biological givens or genetic makeup.¹⁴ Although not explicated, Phillipson’s definition also suggests that interactants can enact agency to negotiate culture, at least on a micro level. More important in this definition are the common forms of

¹³ It is important to note that Philipsen claimed, “That a culture is socially constructed... implies it could have existed before any given set of interlocutors...” (p. 8), which is paradoxical in light of the social construction position, as it seems to imply culture can be an entity predates construction that is fundamentally based upon interaction. Such a view is certainly incompatible with structuration’s duality as well.

¹⁴ “More than” does not mean social construction is separated from biology or “nature” that it often represents. I reject a divided view or dualism of nature and culture (Haraway, 1991).

cultural patterns Philipson has identified (citing Geertz, 1973): Symbols can be “vehicle for a conception” that express meanings, notions, and definitions; premises express “beliefs of existence (what is) and of value (what is good and bad);” rules concern prescriptions “for how to act, under specific circumstances” specific to social groups (for details, see Philipson, 1992, p. 8). Cut to the core, cultures are systems of meanings constituted through and reflect within interactions that (quite in a structural sense) activate human interactions and social ordering (Baxter, 2011).

2.4.1 Dialogism

Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) dialogism underlies Baxter’s RDT. Bakhtin embraces the linguistic shift to living language. His thinking prioritizes language, as he argues “*expression organizes experience*” rather than the other way around, and expression “is what first gives experience its form and specificity of direction” (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 85, as cited in Baxter, 2011, p. 28). This claim, according to Baxter, is considering language as being constitutive of the human experience. Bakhtin rejects both treating language as a closed system and the perspective of “individualistic subjectivism” toward language. The latter views language as “nothing more than the product of an intact, monadic self” (Baxter, 2011), which fails “to understand the social nature of utterance” and falsely attempts “to derive the utterance from the speaker’s inner world as an expression of the inner world” (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 93). To Bakhtin, “the structure of the utterance and of the very experience being expressed is a *social structure*” (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 93), meaning “the utterance is performed in a concrete situation between socially embedded speakers who are mutually answerable” (Baxter, 2011, p. 28). This understanding thus stresses the relationality of the phenomenon of utterance, as “word” is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee. Each and every

word expresses the ‘one’ in relation to ‘the other’ (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 86). Ultimately, to Bakhtin, language is *the dialogue* between individuals/interactants (Baxter, 2011), and “a word is a bridge” linking the self and the other (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 86). Relations embedded in language use are thus highlighted in Bakhtin’s understanding.

Moreover, according to Baxter (2011), Bakhtin (1986) conceptualizes an “utterance” as a link in a “chain of speech communication” or a turn in a talk (Baxter & Norwood, 2015). Importantly, one such link (“B”) does not stand alone but is instead chained to preceding and following links (“A” and “C”). Link “A” and “C” provide the given link “B” its “dialogic overtones” (p. 92). These prior and following turns or links themselves are also embedded in a sequence/turn. Therefore, utterances are sequential and interdependent with each other, not only responding to preceding utterances but also anticipating what may follow. Utterances relate to one another in various ways: a given utterance “refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on” the others (p. 91), revealing the dynamics of discursive struggle.

Importantly, dialogues are situated in time and space, so utterances display spatial-temporal features (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Norwood, 2015). In RDT, the links of utterances are rather elastic, or utterances flow in a flexible fashion through the spatial-temporal span. That is, on the one hand, a given utterance can link to another remote (in terms of both time and space) one enacted long ago and/or far away, exceeding an immediate communicative event. On the other hand, utterances may act upon and react to one another simply with an immediate conversation. In addition to time-space, RDT also takes into account “the dialogic boundary of the said and the unsaid” (Baxter, 2011, p. 30). Some enacted discourses as utterances have historically been repeatedly cited (and recited) by members of speech communities, having become taken-for-granted, shared understandings of a certain “kind of speech communication

event, or a genre” (Baxter, 2011, p. 31) amongst members (as speakers). Therefore, in immediate communication events, these utterances usually sit in the background (indeed are part of which constitute the context), tacit, unsaid, but powerful. Often, a communicative episode involves multiple intertwining utterances with dynamic time-space and said-unsaid references (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Furthermore, dialogism assumes that in dialogue addressers direct meanings to addressees in one turn of talk anticipating responses. While “addressees” can be immediate conversational partners, addressing to distant addressees who are not participating in the immediate conversation but “may respond to the utterance at a future time and place” (Baxter, 2011, p. 31). Bakhtin (1986) deems one such distant address a “superaddressee ‘whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or distant historical time’” (Bakhtin, 1986c, p. 126, as cited in Baxter, 2011, p. 31). According to Baxter, “the presence of a superaddressee creates a loophole in which meaning is forever unfinalizable,” for utterances can resurge outside the immediate exchange in time and space to create new meanings. In RDT, therefore, the dialogue of meaning creation is processual and ongoing.

In short, deriving from dialogism, RDT focuses on the everyday language use, the intersubjective meaning creation in dialogical processes, and power dynamics underlie the interplay of utterances (Baxter, 2011). In RDT’s “language-as-dialogue” framework, an utterance is the “central analytic unit” (Baxter, 2011, p. 30).

2.4.2 Key Components of RDT

2.4.2.1 Four Sites of Struggle

Reflecting the time-space and said-unsaid dimensions of dialogue, RDT (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Norwood, 2015) identifies four patterns of utterance links constituting the utterance chain: First, the *distal already-spoken* link refers to “utterances circulating in the culture at large” or often taken-for-granted cultural discourses (Baxter, 2011, p. 50). Second, the *proximal already-spoken* link captures communicative moments at which “the relationship’s past meaning bumps up against the meaning of the relationship in the present” (p. 51). In other words, this link concerns the interpersonal/relational level of meanings linking past utterances. Third, the *distal not-yet-spoken* link “moves beyond the immediate conversation between [communicators] to an anticipation of how generalized others...superaddressee—will respond to an utterance” (p. 52). In this situation, an addresser is concerned with how a currently involved object of meaning is perceived and/or interpreted by general others or in socially constructed normative discourses, or how these addresses *will* respond to a present utterance. Finally, the *proximal not-yet-spoken* link orients to “the interaction of speaker with the hearer and anticipates a more immediate response than the distal” (p. 52). In this sense, this concern’s level is mainly interpersonal, between immediate relational partners. To Baxter, these links are sites of discursive struggle revealing not only relational meanings but also cultural meanings organizing human relating.

2.4.2.2 Centripetal-Centrifugal Discourses

RDT essentially orients to the struggle between competing discourses—what the term “dialects” captures—embedded in everyday language use (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In other words, discursive struggles are integral to people’s everyday communication through which meanings are sustained and transformed, reflecting and reproducing the power

dynamics of social realities. According to Baxter (2011), RDT's main advancement entails three conceptual and/or analytic aspects concerning struggle, which studies based on the RDT 1.0 have addressed inadequately (hence the upgrade). First, RDT 2.0 stresses a "centripetal-centrifugal distinction" marking the "inequality of discourses in struggle" (p, 123). In this sense, power becomes central to RDT research. Baxter takes a Foucauldian approach to power, understanding power as residing "in the systems of meaning—the discourse—through which social reality as we know it is constructed" (Baxter, 2011, p. 124). Power is sedimented in the discursive practices (knowledge) constituting social institutions, proclaiming what is true and false as well as what is normal and deviant (Foucault, 1990). The process whereby social realities emerge entails power relations, which is what the centripetal-centrifugal distinction tries to reveal. In RDT, a *centripetal discourse* is the *dominant* one, relating to a *centrifugal discourse* by *marginalizing* it (Baxter, 2011). Identifying the centripetal-centrifugal position of discourses, thus revealing power relations in social construction become the task of new RDT research (Baxter & Norwood, 2015; Suter, 2018).

2.4.2.3 Genre of Communication

Baxter (2011) argues, "the interplay of competing discourses cannot be easily isolated from larger patterns of interaction, known as genres" (p. 122). RDT understands genres as "historically and culturally specific, prepatterned and complex solutions to recurrent communicative problems" (Gunthner & Knoblauch, 1995, p. 8 as cited in Baxter, 2011, p. 142). In this third point, Baxter appropriating Bakhtin identifies three *dialogically expansive* genres, including *narrative stories*, *the carnivalesque*, and *relationship rituals*, to which she suggests future RDT-informed studies orient. Genres of expansiveness are particularly important to understanding the struggle of discourse in that they reveal practices enacted for expanding the

space for marginalized, centrifugal discourses. To summarize, narrative stories of any form are expansive and thus hold “dialogic potential” due to their “capacity to place several viewpoints” (p. 143). Additionally, the storytelling process is expansive, as it is indeed a dialogical process linking the teller and listening (co-teller). According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is expansive as it temporally reverses, subverts, and mocks the centripetal or dominant discourse, “creating openings for alterative discourses” that are oppressed (Baxter, 2011, p. 146). Baxter suggests that communication events involving changing people’s normative, mundane roles (a role play) offer sites for exploring struggles embedded in this genre. Finally, relationship rituals are expansive as (in a structural sense) relational rituals produce and reproduce relational identities and social relations and are meaningfully transformative (constructing relational meanings) when performed successfully (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006). This transformation features “hybrids” and “aesthetic moments” of struggle (no longer viewed as a struggle), which remain rare in RDT informed findings (Suter et al., 2015).

2.4.2.4 Forms and Praxes of Struggle

Furthermore, focusing on power struggles, RDT 2.0 urges researchers “to pay greater attention to the details of uttered talk” and identifies different patterns of struggle (p. 122). Baxter (2011) begins the discussion by distinguishing *monologue* and *dialogue*. “Single-voiced monologue” characterizes totalitarian social relations (different levels) where there is only one governing discourse, silencing alternative discourses altogether. A dialogue entails double-voiced discourse, in which alternatives become possible. An ideal form of dialogue exhibits equal voice; however, “often the discursive playing field is unequal...with one discourse centered while alternatives are heard yet still given secondary emphasis” (p. 126).

Further, Baxter (2011) identified two overarching themes of dialogical struggle from existing RDT studies, including “diachronic separation” and “synchronic interplay” (p. 127). In the diachronic separation praxis (“process of constructing meaning,” p. 121), time (the when) become salient, in that competing discourses emerge *one at a time* to take the central position of the meaning-making process (for detailed practices, see Baxter, 2011). However, in RDT, diachronic separation is not so much of an “interplay” due to the isolation of discourses involved. It is the *synchronic interplay* praxis that captures “the co-occurrence of multiple discourses at a given point in time” (p. 131). Synchronic interplay exhibits four dimensions, each foregrounding nuanced features of struggle¹⁵ (e.g., semantic opposition, directedness, playfulness, transformation).

With a critical aim at the interplay of struggling systems, notable RDT studies following RDT 2.0 focus on the synchronic interplay (e.g., Abetz, 2016; Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Dutta, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Sporer & Toller, 2017; Suter et al., 2014; Suter et al., 2015). These researchers showed interests in identifying the nuanced patterns of how competing meaning systems interpenetrate (discussed later), which as Baxter and Norwood (2015) noted, addressed a criticism targeted at the original version of RDT (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) that RDT studies have “nothing new to add” as researchers showing a “cookie-cutter” mentality “keep listing the same basic discursive tensions over and over,” overlaying previous findings “onto a data set without attending to their nuances” (p. 289). Despite Baxter’s effort to push researchers forward by presenting a complex theory with layers of details, the cookie-cutter

¹⁵ To summarize, “antagonistic-nonantagonistic struggle” concerns whether and to what extent multiple semantic positions (i.e., worldviews, meanings systems, discourses, not speakers themselves, see Baxter, 2011) in dialogue clash with each other. “Direct-indirect struggle” focuses on clarity-ambiguity of utterances and how this continuum may function in the power struggle of multivocal meaning making. “Serious-playful struggle” directs attention (and tension) to the tone of utterance and how it may serve as a “sophisticated verbal resource” in the struggles of competing discourses (p. 136). Lastly, “polemic-transformative struggle” considers whether competing discourses can move from “a zero-sum logic” to “a profound realignment” through which new meanings emerge (p. 138).

mentality might be surfacing again as studies spend much of their analytical effort in evidencing the *negating*, *countering*, and *entertaining* patterns Baxter used to build contrapuntal analysis (explained below and in methods), with only *hybridity* and *aesthetic moment* having branched out to extend the three patterns (see Suter et al., 2015). The four dimensions/features of struggle characterizing synchronous interplay might provide an explanation (and potential solution) to this stagnancy in how researchers interpret patterns. That is, these patterns more easily fit in the dimension of polemic-transformative struggle. Indeed, Baxter (2011) used “hybrid” and “aesthetic moment” to capture meaningful transformation and the affective responses linked to it, and Suter et al. (2014, 2015) associated the three patterns with the polemic pole of the same feature (as well as the antagonistic pole of “antagonistic-nonantagonistic struggle”). Perhaps, one way to resist the cookie-cutter mentality to answer Baxter’s call for identifying more lexical markers of interplay is to seek guidance from all four dimensions/features of struggle in analysis.

2.4.2.5 Contrapuntal Analysis

Baxter (2011) has also developed a unique method of conducting RDT research, named “contrapuntal analysis” (inspired by Bakhtin’s use of the music terminology), which metaphorically captures the double-voiced discourses (Suter, 2018). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 6-step thematic analysis forms the basis for this method. The key, however, is to “identify whether discourses compete” to reveal struggle (Baxter, 2011, p, 164). Baxter offers three markers that “capture the polemic nature of centripetal-centrifugal struggle” (Baxter, 2011, p. 167): (a) *negating*, competing discourses rejecting each another’s legitimacy though acknowledging existence (e.g., “...is nonsense”); (b) *countering*, competing discourses accept one another’ legitimacy to a certain extent or not rejecting completely (e.g., “I see the point however...”); (c) *entertaining*, conversational partners of competing discourses holding an open

attitude toward multiple meaning systems (see also Suter et al., 2015). Additionally, Baxter (2011) adapts a range of organizational discursive closure practices that Deetz (1992) identified (e.g., disqualification, naturalization, neutralization), orienting future researchers to “micropractices” that manifest contractive-expansive praxes.

2.4.3 Application in Communication

RDT has been popular since version 1.0 and has inspired a wide range of studies in communication exploring relational dialectics both deductively and inductively. Baxter (2011) provided a thorough critical review of where has RDT research arrived at in her book and organized (translates) them around the four sites of struggle that RDT 2.0 emphasizes. The distal already-spoken site tackling larger social discourses had been most prominent in revealing struggles by the time RDT 2.0 was published (Baxter, 2011), and its prominence remains judging by the more recent studies (see below). Baxter (2011) identified several prominent cultural discourses animating communication in and about relationships based on pioneering North American studies on discourses, including individualism, community, privacy, rationality, romanticism, and relationship-specific discourses (e.g., various forms of friendship and stepfamilies). Early RDT research findings consistently reflect these discourses in context-specific manners. Baxter categorizes them with two overarching themes in RDT 2.0’s language. “The discursive struggle of integration” (p. 61) reveals varied forms of struggles of individualism and community (otherwise labeled “autonomy-connection” and “inclusion-selection,” Baxter, 1993). This theme further includes, for example: “individual identity construction surrounding physical (in)dependence” (e.g., Pawlowski, 2006; Williams & Guendouzi, 2000), in which discourses that associate individualism with relational concerns over age, body, and ability come into play; “individual identity construction as coupled or free of commitment” (e.g., Dickson et

al., 2005), which surfaces the struggles of individualism and community (dependence-autonomy); and more. The second grand theme, “the discursive struggle of expression” (Baxter, 2011, p. 73), encapsulates struggles of acts of expression and nonexpression. Importantly, Baxter posits that both expression and nonexpression acts are dialogically significant concerning meaning making, and that reducing to the mere behavioral would be inadequate. This theme encapsulates deductive RDT studies exploring topics such as marital relationship development and pertinent conflicts (e.g., time commitment) surrounding the openness-closedness dialects (e.g., Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Pawlowski, 1998) and motivations for topic avoidance in relationships (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). It also presents five groups of inductive studies thematized around salient cultural discourses in play in varied relational contexts of significance, such as uncertainty and frustration concerning information openness between older wives and their husbands with dementia (Baxter et al., 2002), and disclosure of positive HIV/AIDS between intimate partners (Derlega et al., 2000). The other three sites with a solid amount of studies exploring them also have helped illuminate phenomena of discursive struggle, but for the sake of time and space, I move on to present several RDT 2.0-informed studies.

This line of research has also come to its fruition and reflects the goal of RDT 2.0 well, in that they centralize power and contextualize meanings, unfolding the centripetal-centrifugal struggle of discourses and revealing communicators’ meaning-making praxes surrounding controversial objects. In a study by Suter et al. (2015), to navigate family life, meanings, and identities, lesbian co-mothers carefully negotiate the struggle of the centrifugal discourses giving meaning to “queer motherhood” and the centripetal, naturalized “biological motherhood” in their everyday communication with other relational partners. They not only identified patterns of the synchronic interplay of these discourses (negating and countering) animating these mothers’

everyday communication, but also, even more impressively, how they achieved discursive transformation. For instance, in one case of hybrid (meaningful transformation to create new discourse), a couple of co-mothers mixed the role of the genetic mother and the gestational mother (mother A carrying the fertilized egg of mother B), thereby successfully convincing extended family members that the child “really” belonged to both families. In a case of “aesthetic,” which orients to the affective realm of transformation, a fleeting, transcending emotional echo occurred amongst mothers who attended the study’s focus group as they shared stories of motherhood.

Dutta (2017) examined the competing discourses from Asia surrounding women’s engineering careers. In this study, the centripetal discourse was comprised of biased, gendered assumptions about engineering that hindered Asian women’s pursuit of an engineering career, while the centrifugal discourse captured practices that resisted these assumptions and enabled participants’ career development. Negating, countering, entertaining, hybridity, and decentering occurred in the interplay of these two discourses, revealing how these women created and maintained the meaningfulness of their career choice. Abetz (2016) investigated the discursive struggles of career ambition facing women who are married doctoral candidates. In this study, the double bind of “you can be anything” and “you can’t have it all” surfaced as competing discourse, reflecting on a higher level the struggle of individualism (career success as admirable) and community (career pursuit as selfish) as well as the biased gender norms against women and career. Abetz, too, identified “direct interplay” of these discourses as well as “transformative hybridity” that exemplified the expansion of meaningful possibilities. More studies informed by RDT 2.0 examined discursive struggles in the meaning construction concerning family form (Van Gilder & Ault, 2018), the transition to motherhood (Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019), the

public perception of the relationship between evangelical Protestants and Catholics (Ptomey, 2015), and more. The recurring theme of these studies, which is also a proposition, is that through these praxes of discursive interplay, people facing the numerous facets of struggle embedded in everyday life can communicatively sustain, create, and transform meanings.

2.4.4 Considering RDT in Sociomateriality

A theory focusing on discourse, RDT can also be enriched by the consideration of sociomateriality and particularly the inseparability of meaning and matter (Barad, 2003, 2007). RDT, in essence, concerns the boundary making practices and the dynamics of (re)configuration of a local determinacy wherein (human and nonhuman) bodies gain meaningful shapes through relating, considering the very focus of an RDT study is an “object of meaning” and the surrounding ideas that (in)form its multifaceted shape wrought into being through relating interactants. RDT may benefit from Barad’s version of sociomateriality or agential realism, which concerns the performative becoming of meaningful matters within relations in two ways. Firstly, the unit of analysis “utterance” in RDT may be considered in terms of “discursive practice of boundary making” or performativity. Doing so may enable an expansion of the very ideas of utterance and dialogue to consider them beyond dialogism’s focus on textuality. Indeed, Bakhtin and Baxter have already been theorizing beyond textuality and spoken/written words by considering the tone of utterances. Considering utterance in terms of performativity may further enable a more expansive approach to identify patterns of how discourses engage in interplay. Secondly, more patterns might be illuminated by agential realism’s consideration that agency is not a human attribute, but the enactment of discursive practices itself (joint practices by different bodies, not just human actors), and thus agency can be attributed to all kinds of things within a phenomenon/relation. By this proposition, it is possible to foreground the agency of meaning

systems or discourses and in their more specific forms (e.g., specific statement) and how they materialize/matter by *moving* other interactants or by making them act.

Indeed, the agency of discourse has been implicitly written all over RDT and relevant studies, simply by their consensus that discourses *activate* or *animate* the meanings of certain objects and that RDT cares more about the relations and positions of meaning systems instead of focusing on interpersonal patterns of conflicts (Baxter, 2011; Suter, 2018). However, the way RDT studies approach the discursive struggles of systems, that is, through identifying patterns of how discourses interpenetrate in human communication, still orient to human actors' enactment of agency. For example, stating that a countering position is activated by a speaker mentioning one discourse only to attribute limited worthiness to it suggests that it is the human speaker who mobilizes preexisting discourses. This suggestion further quickly runs into the classic ontological question that troubled social constructionism: Which comes first, actors or systems? Considering agency as enacted by a network of human and nonhuman actors or the co-agency of actors and systems or words and worlds steps out of this dead-end (Harris, 2015). In this sense, maybe RDT studies (when the source of data is still human actors' words) should also identify patterns of how exactly interactants/actors communicatively enact discursive practices of boundary making, *when constrained and enabled by* the relations of competing discourses that they made present. Such a duality of interactants and discourses considers the co-agency of speakers and discourses.

Finally, in this project, I am interested in studying the "women entrepreneur" as the object of meaning within the Chinese cultural context. Because it is an occupational identity and my interest is in the meanings around it, I drew on SMI and RDT. This application situates the project in the ontology of structuration that is troubled by its undertheorized materiality. I therefore also drew from sociomateriality. With these perspectives, I aim at identifying the

competing discourses surrounding the collective/associative identity of women entrepreneur (i.e., an associative view of occupational identity or that the identity of a type of work is understood by the groups associated with it, Ashcraft, 2013), the relations between or among discourses, as well as the boundary making discursive practices (encapsulating the ideas of “situated action” and “utterance”) by which the identity of women entrepreneur is (re)produced. I next discuss why RDT and SMI as the theoretical foundation of this project can work together.

2.5 Summary and Statement of Research Questions: Bridging SMI and RDT

Scott et al.’s (1998) model (and ST) and RDT are highly compatible. This section identifies four aspects linking these two theories on a fundamental level. Then I turn to two ways in which SMI and RDT complement each other. Table 1 at the end of this section provides a summary.

Table 1. Bridging SMI and RDT

	SMI/ST	RDT
Compatible		
A constitutive view on communication	Communication is a fundamental process shaping society and a general element of interaction. The signification-interpretive scheme-communication dimension of the structurational process is separable only analytically from domination and legitimation. Structures of signification always have to be grasped in connection with domination and legitimation.	Communication in forms of everyday language use or living language produces and reproduces proximal and distal meanings surrounding and activating objects, as well as how communicators relate to these objects and each other.
Actor/communicator	Members (agents) of different levels of collectivities produce and reproduce identification through situated routine interactions by drawing upon various identities (structure). Identities simultaneously enable and constrain agents’ identification process.	People are addressers and addressees involved in the chain of speech communication, which is a process of meaning construction. Meaning systems (i.e., discourses) animate interactants’ discursive practices, while utterances produce and reproduce meanings.

Table 1 (Continued)

Issues of power	<p>Power characterizes all actions (at the structural level, domination as a structural feature is integral to all systems), and as an analytical element, relates to both communication and sanction.</p> <p>“‘Domination’ and ‘power’ cannot be thought of only in terms of asymmetries of distribution but have to be recognized as inherent in social association...Power is not an inherently noxious phenomenon, not just the capacity to ‘say no’; nor can domination be ‘transcended’ in some kind of putative society of the future” (Giddens, 1984, pp. 31-32).</p>	<p>Discursive struggles are integral to people’s everyday communication through which meanings are sustained and transformed, reflecting and reproducing the power dynamics of social realities. Power resides “in the systems of meaning—the discourse—through which social reality as we know it is constructed” (Baxter, 2011, p. 124). Power is sedimented in the discursive practices (knowledge) constituting social institutions, proclaiming what is true and false as well as what is normal and deviant.</p>
Language and symbolic interactionism	<p>“...identity is shaped by and revealed through discourse” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 304), and “perhaps the most important indicators and expressions of identification are found in language” (p. 305).</p> <p>Identification processes depend upon the “co-presence” of other individual and/or collective actors whose presence is in symbolic form.</p>	<p>Utterances are the unit of analysis. People use language to create, negotiate, and transform relational meanings. In RDT, interaction can be “proximal” and “distal.” While proximal utterances address immediate relational partners, distal discourse orients to the generalized “superaddresses” transcending the immediate space and the present time.</p>
Complementary		
Forms of interplay	<p>RDT complements SMI as it is designed for identifying specific forms of discursive interplay/power struggles between competing discourses. RDT offers a more organized method to understand the creative language in identification.</p>	
Situated action	<p>SMI operationalizes identification as fundamentally linked to situated action or activities. The dialectical experience of identification, therefore, must be understood within a context defined by activities.</p> <p>The discursive practices emerging through dialectical experiences, in theory, produce and reproduce larger contexts of identity.</p> <p>It is this consideration of situation/contextuality that foregrounds materiality, and therefore sociomateriality. This consideration expands RDT’s research goals.</p>	

2.5.1 Compatible

To begin with, both SMI and RDT take a constitutive approach to communication. A constitutive view of communication has been established by many communication scholars and articulated by Craig (1999, 2007) to foster a discipline identity for the field of communication. This approach treats communication as a prerequisite to all other social phenomena, such as identity, language, and organization, arguing that communication is the ongoing, constitutive

process through which elements of society emerge, instead of being a secondary phenomenon or being purely instrumental to the analysis (see also McPhee & Zaug, 2009; Putnam et al., 2016). Although Scott et al. (1998) did not clarify that they are taking such an approach, Scott (2020) suggested it is implied in their model. Giddens's ST itself also allows for such interpretation of communication. Granted, as McPhee and colleagues (McPhee & Iverson, 2009; McPhee & Zaug, 2009) have pointed out, Giddens glossed over communication in his vast theorization; still, ST sees communication as a fundamental process shaping society and "a general element" of interaction (p. 29). The signification-interpretive scheme-communication line of the model demonstrating the structurational process is again separable only analytically from domination and legitimation, and "structures of signification always have to be grasped in connection with domination and legitimation" (p. 31). That ST ontologically supports a constitutive view of communication is also agreed amongst many researchers who examine the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) (e.g., McPhee & Zaug, 2009). The four flows model by McPhee and colleagues, for example, indeed draws heavily upon Giddens' theorization about how the social world as recursive practices on different levels come into being through interaction. RDT's constitutive view requires less effort to articulate, as it assumes communication in forms of everyday language use (living language) *produces and reproduces* meanings and other entities such as relationships (Baxter, 2011). RDT studies have also demonstrated within a wide range of contexts that discourses as systems of meanings are created, sustained, and transformed in and through relational partners' everyday talk, which indeed hails to the concept of the duality of structure in ST.

Second, SMI and RDT position actors/communicators similarly as to how they participate in the process of meaning construction. SMI suggests that members (agents) of

different levels of collectivities produce and reproduce identification (as dynamic social processes) through situated routine interactions (particularly *in language*) by drawing upon various identities (structure), and (by ST) that identification process (instantiating identities) simultaneously enable and constrain agents. Similarly, RDT, by dialogism, assumes that people are addressers and addressees involved in the chain of speech communication (as concrete and embodied act), which is a process of meaning construction. Meaning systems (i.e., discourses) animate interactants' discursive practices, while utterances produce and reproduce meanings. SMI and RDT both highlight action and people as active social beings participating in the construction of meaningful realities (SMI is more specific about individuals' attachment to collectives). In this sense, agency is foregrounded but not exaggerated (i.e., neither prioritize structure nor agency). Although RDT does not theorize about agency, agency in a structuralist sense is implied. Agency, according to Giddens, refers to the ability to act otherwise or intervene into social processes, including others' activities. In RDT/dialogism, speakers orient their utterances to each other expecting some sort of responses. Additionally, through the discursive struggle of centripetal and centrifugal discourses, communicators can reposition and even transform meaning systems. Such a relationship between communicators and larger meaning systems also seems to manifest duality. Of course, the notion of agency in this project is complicated by agential realism by Barad (2003), as I explained previously, to consider agency as the performativity/enactment of participating in the "dynamic structuration" of world/reality in its own becoming, of which "humans" are a part (p. 829)

Third, RDT and SMI both emphasize power (a nuance, however, is that neither ST nor SMI centralizes power while RDT does) and orient to power similarly. Although Scott et al. (1998) do not address power in their model, power is foundational to the structuralist process.

In ST, power characterizes all actions (at the structural level, domination as a structural feature is integral to all systems), and as an analytical element relates to both communication and sanction (in actuality, they are inseparable). Furthermore, power is understood similarly in RDT and SMI/ST. Giddens (1984) posits:

“Domination” and “power” cannot be thought of only in terms of asymmetries of distribution but have to be recognized as inherent in social association... Thus—and here we must also reckon with the implications of the writings of Foucault—Power is not an inherently noxious phenomenon, not just the capacity to “say no”; nor can domination be “transcended” in some kind of putative society of the future. (pp. 31-32)

Giddens’ understanding of power, then, resonates with the Foucauldian power, though the nuance lies in that Foucault puts more emphasis on discourse dissemination as in knowledge is power (Foucault, 1990, 1995). As Baxter also links her understanding of power to Foucault, and power itself underlies discursive struggles, SMI/ST and RDT thus are compatible in terms of their conceptual approach to power. Indeed, a structurational perspective may even help explain RDT regarding— “why do and can discourses compete”—by the concept of the duality of structure, agency, and human knowledgeability. Because structuration suggests that human forms of agency are linked to human knowledgeability left “untouched” by “even the crudest forms of reified thought,” absolute domination is logically impossible (Giddens, 1984, p. 26), and thus struggle of discourses always exists somewhere and somehow even during a time of monologue. Additionally, in ST, power always links to discourse as “structures of signification always have to be grasped in connection with domination and legitimation. Once more, this bears upon the pervasive influence of power in social life” (Giddens, 1984, p. 32). This emphasis further agrees with RDT’s propositions. It is also this shared Foucauldian genealogy that makes it possible for a move to agential realism, which extends on Foucault’s understanding of discourse and materiality, as explained earlier.

Fourth, both RDT and SMI recognize the routine use of language *as a form of* discursive practice as the unit of analysis and acknowledge the various forms/genres of discourse. RDT's focus on language requires little clarification as Baxter (2011) states utterances are the unit of analysis in RDT. And RDT studies thus far all explore how people use language to create, negotiate, and transform relational meanings within different spaces (including digital spaces, see Hintz & Brown, 2019). On another level, Scott et al. (1998) also reiterated the importance of language in that "identity is shaped by and revealed through discourse" (p. 304), and "perhaps the most important indicators and expressions of identification are found in language" (p. 305). They specifically identify "narrative" and "account of personhood" as two forms of such discourse. A shared intellectual genealogy to symbolic interactionism also links RDT and SMI. In RDT, interaction can be "proximal" and "distal." While proximal utterances address immediate relational partners, distal discourse orients to the generalized "superaddresses" transcending the immediate space and the present time (see previous sections). Similarly, in SMI, identification processes depend upon "actual, hypothesized, or even retrospectively examined interaction" entailing the "co-presence" of other individual and/or collective actors whose presence is essentially "in symbolic form" (Scott et al., 1998, p. 305). That the co-presence being, therefore, enables the different time-space distancing of interaction. That is, the identification target can be specific organizational members (within certain locales) and a generalized collectivity, and the self-other relationship is multidimensional.

2.5.2 Complementary

SMI and RDT also enhance the analytical and explanatory power of each other at least in two ways. To begin with, RDT complements SMI as it is designed for identifying specific forms of discursive interplay/power struggles between competing discourses. The many forms of

interplay entail the nature of voices (i.e., monologue and dialogue) and praxes of struggle; therefore, an exhaustive review is beyond the scope of the present project. However, some examples may clarify SMI and RDT's complementary nature.

For instance, RDT research to date has identified two overarching categories of dialogue. *Diachronic separation* captures moments and processes when a shift of discourses characterizes a discourse-animated object; that is, one of the two competing discourses takes turns occupying the center of meaning making, in a mutually exclusive fashion. Diachronic separation demonstrates two practices (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), including *spiraling inversion* (emphasizing *when* a discourse is centralized) and *segmentation* (emphasizing *which one*). To concretize, researchers using RDT to examine romantic relationships often find the spiral inversion of autonomy and connection, or, romantic partners periodically foreground autonomy while backgrounding connection, or vice versa, to maintain the relationship (e.g., Hoppe-Nagao & Ting-Toomey, 2002).

In contrast, *synchronic interplay* captures “the co-occurrence of multiple discourses at a given point in time” in four dimensions (p. 131). To summarize, the *antagonistic-nonantagonistic struggle* is about whether concurrent discourses are semantically opposing each other or if they just coexist, and the distinction is murky (see Baxter, 2011). The *direct-indirect struggle* centers around the *ambiguity* of meaning and the ways in which it shapes the discursive interplay. Baxter observes that ambiguity may be utilized by relational parties to avoid “the direct interplay between competing discourses” (e.g., disqualification, neutralization, p. 135), to produce marginalization by not addressing alternatives directly, and to “temper the authoritativeness of a dominant discourse” (p. 136). *The serious-playful struggle* orients to “the tone of an utterance” (p. 136), exploring how playfulness in utterances may function to alter

meanings. *The polemical-transformative struggle* encompasses the entanglement, integration, and transformations of meaning systems/discourses. It is possible, however, that competing discourses integrate to create creative, transformational possibilities allowing for the emergence of new meanings. Baxter and Norwood (2015) refer to these possibilities as discursive hybrids and aesthetic moments. The former encapsulates processes “of mixing two or more distinct discourses to create a new meaning” (Baxter, 2011, p. 139); the latter, while similarly transformative, foreground moments and events sitting “in the affective realm,” echoed with joy, empathy, and other transcendent emotions epitomizing the fleeting override of discursive struggles. In RDT’s framework, this meaningful transformation is considered the ideal yet fleeting result of the display of tensional discourses (for examples, see Suter et al., 2015).

These specific forms accumulating upon over a decade of scholarship on dialectics and contradiction are highly useful for investigating the identification involving multiple identities. Scott et al. (1998) indeed recognize the dynamic relationship underlying the “interplay of multiple identities of the self” (p. 312) and the tensions embedded in pluralistic identification processes (e.g., uniqueness versus being part of a crowd). They illustrate that “employee’s view work group and organization may be identical, partially overlapping, or entirely separate from one another” (p. 315); drawing from Cheney (1991), they suggest, “Creative language use” enables “almost innumerable possibilities in terms of connections between and among identities, both synchronically and over time” (p. 315). RDT then offers a more organized method to understand the creative language and innumerable possibilities, including identifying the genres of discourse.

SMI’s situated action view on identification (a meaning-making process) enhances RDT precisely by its focus on situation or contextuality that considers locales (which I argued earlier

as part of the situation instead of determining the situation). Linking utterances (about one's understating of certain identities) with situated action enhances RDT in two ways. First, it pushes RDT researchers to take into account materiality or indeed the materialization/mattering of beings and relations within the relation/phenomenon being observed (e.g., who and what played critical roles in the local construction of meaning, Cooren, 2020). For example, the regionalization (i.e., the differentiation of time-space through social interactions) of identities in part highlights the physical settings of a person's identification and their properties, such as a conference room where a team of members communicates, by which their team identities are enacted. Within this communication, there are other things (nonhumans) that enabled and constrained the membership formation, such as the practice of meeting and the conference room itself. The symbolic process of identification of a person is indeed discursive-material, contingent on an active situation/context made of matters enabling and constraining activities. For example, tensions over material resources (here, in the financial sense) constrain (and simultaneously enable) how higher-education fundraisers negotiate their occupational identity (Meisenbach, 2008). Ultimately, RDT studies can be enriched by foregrounding the situatedness of the meaning-making process that RDT concerns by paying attention to *things* such as mattering places and spaces made present in talk.

Furthermore, SMI's emphasis on activities as the basis from which identities and identification become meaningful enables an inclusive or expansive view on what can be taken into account regarding the meaning-making dialogue. Thinking about the meaning-making unit, which in RDT is an utterance in talk, in terms of situated action also highlights that even just talking to/with relational partners is practically consequential (i.e., "talk" is "walk," a blurred boundary between speech communication and action, Ashcraft et al., 2009; Schoneborn et al.,

2019). For one, the situated action perspective considers it as part of the systems or recursive social activities that produce and reproduce structures (identity in SMI), and in turn (by duality), shaping the everyday activities as well as modalities by which action is possible (e.g., meaning exchange between people is made possible by shared interpretive schemes). For example, RDT indeed implies such an intertwined relationship between communication and action, in that while RDT theoretically concerns the dialectics of meanings revealed through spoken words, patterns of discursive interplay do draw on people's ongoing experiences and understandings of behavioral changes regarding how they express themselves and relate to others (e.g., how much time partners spend with each other. Meanwhile, talking (in a literal sense) not only enables but also *is part of* the routine activity of how partners maintain relationships (for a review on more than a decade of RDT research, see Baxter, 2011).

2.5.3 Research Questions

In sum, given that entrepreneurship and entrepreneur as an occupational identity have been historically and ongoingly produced and reproduced to be male and masculine by discourse (in an essentialist sense perpetuating gender binaries), women who practice entrepreneurship face a range of constraints mattering in different forms (e.g., funding, network, symbolic representation, Brush et al., 2019). In this sense, a woman entrepreneur emerges discursively as an identity characterized by contradictions. The current project aims at understanding this contradictory situatedness in the understudied Chinese context, specifically by investigating the relational dialectics in forms of competing meanings systems/discourses that activate Chinese women entrepreneurs' boundary negotiation, by which they achieve (also maintain, transform, destroy) some type of alignment/attachment to the entrepreneurial identity. Identity by SMI is conceptualized as the more abstract, ideal targets of rules and resources determining how

individuals and collectives can be understood and practiced in what kind of situations. These targets or ideals emerge through and are scaled up from—and simultaneously constrain and enable—identification, a process of recursive activities necessarily situated somewhere, by which people make meaningful attachment to these ideals. Considering sociomateriality, the situated action of human actors is part of the boundary making discursive practices enacted/performed by a network of actors/agents *of a situation/relation/phenomenon* who/that make meaningful boundaries between themselves and others, to materialize as bodies. Agency is the co-enactment of the boundary making. By the same token, discourse materializes and enacts agency. With these ideas, I draw on RDT to explore the discourses surrounding the object of meaning, “women entrepreneur,” in the Chinese context by observing competing meanings in their storied lived experiences. Additionally, structuration, and therefore SMI, complicated by consideration of sociomateriality, form the ontological positioning of my project, which not only provide specific language in terms of how I perform analysis, but also extend the research questions by adding layers that are not asked in extant RDT studies. I ask:

RQ1: What and where do competing discourses activate the meaning of “woman entrepreneur” as Chinese women entrepreneurs talk about their working lives?

The “what” part of this question is the main goal of RDT studies. The added “where” orients to: (1) specific zones or spaces of social interaction often bracketed by specific locations (e.g., family home, workplace, shared public spaces of a community, a conference meeting); (2) more broadly to things or people or, in general, beings/bodies constitutive of a situation in which certain identities are activated (i.e., identification) by participants.

RQ2: In what ways do competing discourses engage in interplay, and how do women entrepreneurs move/act through the interplay of discourses?

The first part of the question, again, follows established RDT studies to identify the particular ways (i.e., lexical markers) in discourses through which some types (e.g., negating, hybrid) of the relationship between discourses or meaning systems are established. The second part, however, further considers the issue of agency, and more specifically, the co-agency of discourses and communicators. That is, in their structuration, discourses and their relations are created, maintained, and transformed through people talking but also make people talk in certain ways.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Researchers have applied and advanced SMI's perspectives, interacting with other important issues of identification such as the linkage between/among nested identities (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014), both using quantitative methods and qualitative methods. The former application often reflects a post-positivist paradigmatic orientation, seeking to explore, for example, how identification with multiple identity target varies situationally, what the relationship between/among multiple identity resources entails, how different identities relate to other organizational phenomena, and what activity-based factors shape which identification choices (e.g., Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Lammers et al., 2013; Scott & Stephens, 2009). The latter use of SMI is usually hermeneutical, commonly exploring the context-specific/situated discursive strategies and activities (some emphasizing performativity) that individuals/members developed to manage and/or negotiate the messy relationships linking multiple identification targets/sources in the meaning-making process (e.g., Chaput et al., 2011; Larson & Pepper, 2003; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014). I align with the hermeneutical orientation to SMI, thus also employ qualitative methods. Importantly, issues of power relations (e.g., sanctions and resistance) is implied in SMI and thus perhaps the SMI-informed studies; however, studies using SMI as a guiding framework have not foregrounded power like studies exploring other phenomenon of identification, such as the self as target of managerial control (see Alvesson et al., 2008). On the other hand, power struggles are the central concern of RDT in which Baxter (2011) has taken a clear critical stand. Furthermore, RDT provides its own unique discourse analysis method (contrapuntal analysis) that helps surface moments of the interplay of competing

meanings. There are many forms of qualitative data, but qualitative SMI studies and RDT studies mainly rely on qualitative/in-depth interviews, with other methods (ethnographic observation) complementing the data collection. Scott et al. (1998) and Baxter (2011) also identify narrative stories as sources for studying identification and dialogic interplay. In RDT specifically, narratives stories are considered dialogically *expansive* texts that reveal multiple voices. Although Baxter (2011) calls for the exploration of alternative texts through different methods (such as online texts, Hintz & Brown, 2020), I follow the tradition of using in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Tracy, 2013) with a narrative approach (Riessman, 2008). I intend to approach all three RQs by using in-depth interviews, although the analytical methods vary. For RQ1 and RQ2, I employ Baxter's contrapuntal analysis, which is a unique form of semantic analysis designed for eliciting relational dialectics. For RQ3, I rely more on a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore patterned practices from the ground up.

3.1 Qualitative Interviews with a Narrative Approach

Qualitative interviewing is one of the most valuable methods that has been continuously developed and refined by researchers across disciplines. Tracy (2013) suggests that “interviews provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation via a path that is organic, adaptive, and oftentimes energizing” (p. 132). She, among other methodologists, contends interviewing is a dynamic, interactive process involving the co-construction of meanings, active self-other negotiations, as well as the power dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee. Interviews are also purposeful (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) and “are especially valuable for providing information and background on issues that cannot be observed or efficiently accessed” (Tracy, 2013, p. 132). Thus, rich data of reality construction and how people come to understand their worlds are elicited through such a process (Lindlof & Taylor,

2019). Importantly, because interviewing is an intersubjective process of co-producing data and co-creating meanings, researchers must also be reflexive about how their subjectivities, identities, and positionalities may shape the interview process (Roulston et al., 2003).

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2019), the purpose of qualitative interviews has multiple layers that go beyond “*generating factual information about the world*” (p. 221). Even when people are not intentionally and/or unintentionally telling lies or twisting information, “fact” itself is contingent on and reside within the lived experience (e.g., social locations; bodily orientations) of respondents; that is, subjectivity is inevitable, and thus voices are value-laden and rightfully so. Additionally, the context of interaction (interview) also shapes how and what meanings are constructed and exchanged. Lindlof and Taylor hence identified several other purposes associated with qualitative interviews, including: “*understanding people’s experience, knowledge, and worldview... elicit the language forms used by culture members*” (pp. 222-223)—then emphasizing the functionality of interviews—“*interviews can inquire into the past of a person or community... verify, validate, or comment on information obtained from other sources... achieve efficiency in data collection*” (p. 224). Additionally, interview talks have three interacting forms:

Stories give concrete shape to human experience in terms of actors, motives, contexts, and actions [whereby storytellers] achieve some coherence in shaping their own understandings... *accounts* [are] excuses or justifications of social conduct... *explanations* [refer to] how people express (and defend) a philosophy, a cultural logic, a belief system, or a lay theory and [how explanations are applied situationally]. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 223; see also Tracy, 2013).

These forms commonly occur together in interviews, and researchers use these terms rather freely. I here use “narrative” as a higher-order category to loosely capture these many forms and dimensions of the discursive processes whereby people retrospectively and ongoingly make

sense (Weick, 1995) as well as create, negotiate, sustain, and transform meanings. As Riessman (2008) states,

The goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements...narratives come in many forms and sizes, ranging from brief, tightly bounded stories told in answer to a single question, to long narratives that build over the course of several interviews and traverse temporal and geographical space... (p. 23)

The word discourse then is used as reflecting an even higher order of abstraction here, aligning with Baxter (2011); that is, narratives are a genre of discourses (with innate discursive struggles in a Foucauldian sense). Specific details about interview protocol design are discussed in the procedure section.

3.1.1 Participants

Participants are women in mainland China who are considered/consider themselves as entrepreneurs and are active in starting or sustaining businesses as owners or co-owners. In total, I reached out to 42 perspective participants using different sampling strategies, 38 of whom agreed to participate, and 34 who completed the in-depth and/or focus group interviews ($n=34$; completion rate=81%). The four uncompleted interviews were due to the compounded reason of scheduling difficulties and the COVID-19 pandemic.

I conducted in-depth interviews with 29 participants, 24 of which were in-person/face-to-face, while the other five were online using WeChat. Six participants, including one who also did an in-depth interview, participated in a focus group interview. I collected most interviews (30 of 34, or 88%) in two waves during my visits to China between spring and fall school terms. 29 of the 30 interviews were in-person (I interviewed one participant online on a different date after we met in person). I collected the first ten interviews in the summer of 2019, from June to August, and then another 20 (including the focus group) from December 2019 to early January

2020. During the second visit, I recruited 24 participants. However, one never replied after we met at a dinner party with four other prospective participants, where she verbally agreed to participate. The remaining three were too occupied because it was during the end of a year, so they decided they could participate either through WeChat after the Chinese New Year or during my anticipated visit in the summer of 2020. That was when COVID-19 (started as the Novel Coronavirus epidemic in China in January) came in to change things. In an earlier version of this document, I wrote:

I originally planned to keep collecting at least five more video phone interviews amidst the course of the regular semester. However, the Coronavirus epidemic that China is going through currently, which has significantly impacted China's social order, disrupted this plan. For one, firms, public institutions, and other organizations were forced to cease operations. My primary informant hence suggested that I wait until a calmer time. I planned to visit China again from mid-May to early August 2020, so that I could collect my final 20 interviews in a face-to-face manner (and also visit their familiar spaces). I originally aimed for 50 interviews. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic is now forcing me to overhaul my plans. It is highly possible that I will not be able to return to China during the upcoming summer break, and all remaining interviews will have to be conducted virtually.

Long story short, I could not return to China. After my dissertation committee's deliberation, they decided that 30 interviews were plentiful. However, we also agreed that I might need a few more participants belonging to the "younger" generations (i.e., Chinese "millennials"), so I contacted six more prospective participants, four of whom participated.

Participants came from a variety of industries, and all but two were (co)owners and/or (co)founders of different levels of enterprises, ranging from shops to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to multi-billion, multinational companies. The specific title(s) of participants varied depending on the forms of the company and how positions were classified/divided/assigned (e.g., chairperson of a board; CEO; executive director; president). Participants from smaller companies sometimes take multiple positions and roles usually

assigned to different top-level members in larger companies. In general, they were all amongst the top management. Biographically, participants all identified themselves as women; all but one identified as Han Chinese (i.e., the ethnic majority in China), while one woman identified as belonging to the Tujia ethnicity.¹⁶ Participants came from varying family backgrounds and class origins, ranging from poor families in impoverished, rural areas (i.e., “poor peasant class/贫农”), to families associated with “the decaying/Black/exploitive class” (“黑五类”) during the era of harsh class struggles (i.e., Cultural Revolution), to families that are highly privileged for political and/or economic reasons. In China, generations are divided by decades. The generations to which participants belonged varied, ranging from “Post-40s” to “Post-90s.” For example, someone in the Post-40s generations would have been born between 1940 to 1949. Members of this cohort would very likely have experienced the Cultural Revolution (from 1966 to 1976) in its full force during their young adulthood. Likewise, the Post-90s generational cohort includes anyone born between 1990 to 1999, a generation that has grown up along with the rapid growth of China’s socialist market economy established as a goal of reformation in 1992. Their experiences were also diverse in terms of education and marital status. Additionally, all the names appearing in this dissertation are pseudonyms; other identifiers (e.g., specific geographic location; names of the companies) are erased or altered for considerations of anonymity, especially since some of these women otherwise would be easily identifiable.

¹⁶ The contemporary China recognizes 56 ethnic groups. Han is considered the dominant group, constituting about 91 percent of the population. The Tujia ethnic group is one of the larger minority groups (“*shao shu min zu*”), with over eight million people by 2010.

Table 2. Study Participants

Pseudonym *=-focus group participants	Industry	Generation (Post-)	Total assets (if disclosed) in RMB (¥) and USD (\$) *=-personal net worth when clarified	Marital status	Education attainment *=-study abroad experience
Aixiang	Education	60	¥100+ mn \$15.23+ mn	Married	Secondary vocational school
Baixin*	Traditional crafts	60	N/A	N/A	N/A
Bing	Biomedicine, sports, investment	60	¥>50+ bn \$>7.61+ bn	Married	MS
Bijun	Catering, real estate, culture	50	¥200+ mn \$30.46+ mn	Complicated	Some high school education
Boya	Traditional culture	60	N/A	Married	AA
Congfei	Agriculture	70	¥10 mn \$1.52+ mn	Married	High school
Congrong	Logistics, enterprise platform	80	N/A	Married	BA*
Cuiwei	Chamber of commerce	80	N/A	Married	BA (in preparation for EMBA)
Dinchun	Sports	70	¥1.4+ bn \$0.30+ bn	Single	MA
Fang	Water purifier/filtration retail	80	¥400+ k * \$60.91+ k*	Married	High school
Hai	Education	80	N/A	Married	MA*
Hanchun	Food	60	¥50+ bn \$7.61+ bn	Married	HRM
Jiefei	Biofarm, agriculture	60	¥600+ mn \$91.37+ mn	Remarried	BA
Jingjing	Sports and culture, investment	70	N/A	Married	BA
Lili*	Childcare	80	N/A	N/A	N/A
Menghui	Cartoon and early education	60	N/A	Married	MIB
Mengting	Pharmaceutical	60	N/A	Married	BA

Table 2. (Continued)

Mingran	Cosmetology	90	¥10+ mn * \$1.52+ mn *	Single	BA
Qiang	Investment, gold	70	¥10+ bn \$1.52+ bn	Married	MBA*
Qiuyun	Sports, clothing	70	¥2+ bn \$0.30+ bn	Married	EMBA*
Quan	Sports and culture	70	N/A	Divorced	BA*
Qunxi	Agriculture, e-commerce	80	¥10 mn to 100 mn \$1.52 mn to 15.23 mn	Married	BA
Peiran	Early education	90	N/A	Single	BA*
Ping	Decoration design	80	¥80+ mn */300+ mn \$12.18+ mn*/45.68+ mn	Divorced	AA
Ruoyun*	Furniture	90	N/A	Married	BA*
Ruxi*	Gem	60	N/A	N/A	N/A
Shanglan	Chemical	60	N/A	Married	AA
Tianjing	Fitness equipment	70	N/A	Married	Some college education
Weimin	Lightning technology	40	¥3+ bn \$0.46+ bn	Married	Some high school education and some college education
Wenhui	Tourism	60	N/A	Married	High school
Xia*	Agriculture	80	N/A	N/A	N/A
Yuehui*	Private hospital	60	N/A	N/A	N/A
Yun	E-commerce platform	80	N/A	Married	BS
Zihan	Cosmetology	90	¥2+ mn \$30.46k+ mn	Single	BA

3.1.2 Procedures

3.1.2.1 Interview Protocol Design

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, I employ qualitative interviewing with a narrative approach (Riessman, 2008) as the main methodological choice for this dissertation project. Lindlof and Taylor (2019) and Tracy (2013) distinguished multiple forms of qualitative interviews commonly used in communication. I here identify with three specific forms: informant interviews emphasize savvy insiders' knowledge, information, and perspectives; respondent interviews seek open-ended responses and the interpretations of meaningful dimensions of the lived experience from a given population; narrative interviews highlight both the act and content of storytelling, the entirety/integrity of stories, loose interview structure, and equality between interviewer and interviewee. I integrated these interview strategies into the design of my interview protocol. For example, some questions are aimed at insider's and expert's knowledge (e.g., how do you understand...?), while some others orient to storytelling (could you tell me a time...?). In general, I kept the interview structure flexible, depending on how much time a participant had as well as her individual storytelling style (i.e., some were more linear while some flowed rather freely). Some interviews were more structured, in which I went through the interview protocol in a linear order; more often, however, I let go of the control (Riessman, 2008) to the interview. Most interviews were still loosely structured (semi-structured), but there were a few cases in which participants fully took on the storyteller role after I asked the opening question. Specific interview questions, topics, and themes (see Appendix A) draw from a range of interpenetrating interdisciplinary research trends germane to my dissertation—many of which were reviewed in the previous chapter. To name a few: entrepreneurship, occupational identity (and identification), work-life issues, women's career

experiences across arenas, feminist theorizing and gender studies, relational dialectics, and so forth.

Here is an example showing how I thought through one question. Entrepreneurship is normed masculine. Career women in conventionally masculine arenas tend to face challenges associated with competing roles concerning their professional identities and the conventional gender roles often tethered to the home space. The talk that women entrepreneurs heard from their family members about their (women entrepreneurs') career choice and everyday work can be an important source that elicits the (proximal) meanings surrounding women entrepreneurs these women internalize. However, informed by gender studies, I reject assumptions of marriage, husband, and childbirth as part of the norms of women's family life. I, therefore, asked them to describe their family to me before proceeding to further explore how their family members talk about their work. This strategy indeed helped reveal an array of nuances and details about participants' significant relationships and how these relationships might have shaped their entrepreneurial experience. Interestingly, two participants even responded to the family questions (e.g., how do your family members talk about your career and work?) positively in a metacommunicative sense. They contrasted my questions about their family lives with those that they encountered in other interviews involving the media, where on the latter occasion, interviewers simply assumed things such as they must have experienced marital conflicts due to their success as professional women, or they had a hard time fulfilling household responsibilities assigned to women.

3.1.2.2 IRB and Participants Recruitment

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of South Florida determined that my research meets the criteria for exemption (Pro00040658). Therefore, I received an exempt

certification. During the IRB process, I was asked to obtain documentation on cultural sensitivity. I, therefore, contacted the Changsha Federation of Social Science Association Council, sent them the Chinese version of my informed consent, and received a letter stating my research would not post threats to participants' fundamental rights and personal safety.

Once I obtained the IRB approval, I started the data collection design. I began to share my ideas and designs with family members who would assist the data collection process. They helped primarily in the sampling process, such as introducing me to specific women entrepreneurs and/or key members of a local association of women entrepreneurs. They also reviewed my recruiting materials and suggested minor changes to wording or phrasing. The recruiting materials included an invitation letter (Appendix E) as well as the Chinese version of the adult consent form itself (Appendix D). Although IRB exempted my study, I used the consent form as an informative document that could answer some possible questions and concerns a prospective participant might have.

Data collection used three common sampling strategies utilized by qualitative researchers. The primary approach was network sampling (Creswell, 2007), a process that relies on the researchers' social and professional networks for the distribution of research participation calls. My family members, who are highly resourceful in their own rights, greatly facilitated this approach. Opportunities for snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) also emerged, as some participants indeed generously offered to help me connect with more prospective participants through their professional networks, especially when they thought the project was meaningful and important. These two approaches also created opportunities for me to access local and/or regional professional networks for women entrepreneurs (usually associated with local Women's

Federation, e.g., an association of women entrepreneurs) through key members. One association indeed helped me conduct a 2-hour focus group meeting with 6 of their members.

In general, the data collection processes are highly *guanxi*-based/oriented (Kritz et al., 2013; Long et al., 2018). *Guanxi*, loosely translated as “personal connections and/or relationships” (Kritz et al., 2013, p. 28), is a concept related to (but goes beyond) social capital, which captures the complexity of networking and resource mobilizing in China (e.g., an exchange of gifts is tacitly expected in many levels of social organizing process). A *guanxi*-based approach alludes to a researcher’s participation in *guanxi*-building activities during the recruitment process as well as the ongoing management of *guanxi*. Therefore, on occasions, there were more layers of *guanxi*-building beyond just participating in the study; that is, participants might see participating as a way of maintaining valuable relationships (collegial relationships and/or friendship) with another resourceful individual. Some common practices of *guanxi*-building/maintaining also occurred occasionally, including exchanges of small gifts (e.g., food products considered local specialties, books, or perfume) and getting lunch/dinner together (i.e., *chifan*/吃饭). No pecuniary exchange was involved. A recruiting process usually followed the culturally appropriate pattern. In the beginning, a third party who offered help (e.g., a family member and/or a key member of a professional network) or I reached out to a prospective participant via text messages and/or phone calls, whereby brief exchange about my study happened. If a prospective participant expressed interest, we would send the two recruiting materials (Appendix E) to her. Then the prospective participant would make a final decision regarding whether to participate or not (during which she might ask questions about the study).

3.1.2.3 Interview Process

After a woman entrepreneur agreed to participate, an interview would be scheduled directly or indirectly, with herself or through her assistant, prioritizing the convenience of the participant. Some other cases, however, involved more formal processes. For example, although the interview was about a woman entrepreneur's personal lived experience, her company's legal or PR team (sometimes her assistant) would evaluate how sensitive or potentially threatening the questions might be and then approve the interview. In these cases, I also needed to send informative materials (even including the English version of the recruiting items and my CV in some cases) to these parties. Appointments under these circumstances were usually made with an assistant. Nonetheless, all interviews, including those that involved more formal processes, were conducted smoothly, in that all participants were willing (even eager) to share their stories and understandings, and I was able to build an amicable relationship with them. Typical difficulties I encountered involved scheduling, traveling (internationally), and networking itself. Interview locations were chosen by participants. They mostly chose their private office in their company during weekends or weekdays; some other locations included a reserved private room at a restaurant or a tea house, a hotel room (during a business trip), and my family home. I, therefore, visited many participants at their companies. Interviews involved more formal processes also were accompanied with additional reception steps during my visits to the companies. Instead of meeting a participant right away, I would be received by an assistant or receptionist. However, I made sure that the interview was conducted privately.

As mentioned earlier, I conducted 29 in-depth face-to-face or online narrative interviews and a focus group interview with 6 participants. After each interview, I immediately uploaded the voice memo to USF Box, while also deleting the copy on my phone, as per the USF IRB's

recommendation. All interviews were recorded using an iPhone X in flight mode per participants' permission. Interviews averaged 89.5 minutes long (ranged 17-177 minutes; in total, 2,685 minutes). I transcribed all interviews in Chinese using a paid online, computer-generated service (<https://www.iflyrec.com/>), which produced 514 pages of single-spaced text as the raw data. The automated transcriptions were not reliable when speakers had strong accents (not "standard Chinese" or *Putonghua*, so to speak), nor could it break sentences very well, which required a lot of rework or at least re-organization. The primary language used was Chinese; however, one participant had lived in an English-speaking country for many years and had just returned to China a few years ago. So, she occasionally expressed herself in English. I processed (i.e., coded) the transcribed interviews without translating them into English to retain the original sense and linguistic context of the interviews. I did, however, translate examples selected for reporting the findings (chapters 4 and 5), taking a contextualized translation approach. Contextualizing while translating the text includes practices such as not only translating the words but also inserting contextual (e.g., historical, cultural, value-based) details and sometimes translating expressions into different versions so that the nuances of phrasing are retained for interpretation (see Long et al., 2013).

Other noteworthy data sources that facilitated the project were as follows: Networking events; interactions with participants' assistants or other trusted employees (e.g., a 47-minute discussion with two women in managerial positions); two books written by a participant and booklets provided by other participants; company websites; online news articles; publicly available data associated with 11 participants; 17 brief company visits.

3.1.3 Data analysis

I simultaneously performed two types of analysis to process the data, including RDT's contrapuntal analysis based on thematic analysis and a specific kind of discourse analysis (Baxter, 2011) as well as the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017). The analytical process was facilitated by ATLAS.ti 8, a powerful tool that helps organize qualitative data. I next explain the two analytical approaches.

3.1.3.1 Contrapuntal Analysis

RDT is equipped with its own practices of contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011), inspired by Bakhtin's use of the music terminology, "contrapuntal," which metaphorically captures the double-voiced discourses (Suter, 2018). Contrapuntal analysis entails two processes, which I practiced concurrently. The first goal of RDT studies is to identify competing discourses or meaning systems. To achieve this goal, Baxter (2011) has suggested employing a six-step *thematic analysis* approach that Braun and Clarke (2006) have outlined that enables a more systematic process of unfolding the discursive struggles embedded in utterances. Thematic analysis is comprised of iterative processes guided by existing literature and concepts that aim to generate thematic/meaningful categories among unorganized words and ideas and, in general, textualized human experiences (Tracy, 2013). Analysts go through several steps of coding the raw data into units and then further finding links or categorizing these units into categories of meaning with higher levels of abstraction. In short, thematic analysis is useful in finding commonalities and nuances among diverse perspectives.

Here, I summarize the six steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Step 1 begins with researchers familiarizing themselves with the data, which includes transcribing the data itself and then (re)reading the text for a rudimentary understanding. Step 2, "generating initial coding

categories,” is an iterative or repetitive process whereby texts are segmented by units of meanings called “codes.” Additionally, textual codes vary in length, ranging from a word (e.g., balance, incompatible, motherhood) to a short descriptive sentence (e.g., describing family harmony; negating the idea that women need stable jobs), so coded units can be a few words or a whole story. This process carries on until texts are saturated for the purpose of answering specific questions. Step 3 entails generating rudimentary/early themes by categorizing initial codes resulted from step 2. Researchers reorganize initial codes into themes of higher orders of meaningful abstraction (e.g., “her understanding of women entrepreneur” and “associating ‘perseverance’ with women entrepreneur” put in “general ideas about women entrepreneurs”), while themes usually demonstrate a semantic hierarchy, too (e.g., “Women do not belong in business” over “women need stable jobs”). Specifically, in RDT, this is the process that leads to the identification of discourses. At this stage, Owen’s (1984) “recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness” thematic criteria guide the selection of key themes for analysis. Steps 4 and 5 continue working around themes (discourses), entailing reviewing themes by checking them against the raw data and finalizing themes by conceptualizing and naming them (e.g., “Women do not belong in business” changed to “women entrepreneurs as misplaced bodies”). Through these steps, researchers are able to identify themes representing meaning systems whose dialectical relationships are to be further unfolded. Ultimately, step 6 involves identifying episodes and vignettes in data that exemplify themes.

A thematic analysis, however, is not enough to answer the second type of question in RDT studies, which concerns what the nuanced patterns of discursive struggle are. Therefore, RDT studies typically also include a specific discourse analysis, achieved through identifying lexical markers (i.e., specific words) that reveal relations between different discourses. Baxter,

drawing upon engagement research (Martin & White, 2005), has identified three discourse markers that “capture the polemic nature of centripetal-centrifugal struggle” (Baxter, 2011, p. 167). First, *negating* speaks of occasions when competing discourses, though acknowledging different positions, fundamentally reject or disclaim one another’s legitimacy and value. Second, *countering* differs from negating by the extent of disclaiming the competing discourses. In other words, countering does not completely deem a different discourse wrong while admitting the limited worthiness of an opposing discourse. Third, *entertaining* alludes to a more open attitude toward competing discursive positions by legitimizing multiple disparate working meaning systems (also see Suter et al., 2015). Some common patterns or relations between competing discourses identified in extant RDT studies include negating, countering, entertaining, and hybrid (e.g., Abetz, 2016; Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Dutta, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Sporer & Toller, 2017; Suter et al., 2014, Suter et al., 2015). These patterns themselves are markers used to guide the discourse analysis. For example, when I coded an interview, I would have coded an utterance or episode as “negating” (e.g., “I disagree that mothers should constantly be around their kids”). When doing analysis, I paid attention to conjunctions (like, but, and, if, not only...but also) and comment adverbs (such as surprisingly and unfortunately) because these are often signs of competing meanings. However, it is also common that discursive struggles are embedded in the semantic context like content, form, style, tone, and genre of utterances (Baxter, 2011).

Baxter (2011) further adopts Deetz’s (1992) work on organizational discursive closure practices (e.g., disqualification, naturalization, neutralization), calling for attention to contractive-expansive discursive micropractices that, on the one hand, can be used to perpetuate centripetal discourses while marginalizing alternative centrifugal discourses (contractive); and on

another, similar practices may be enacted to expand the semantic possibility of utterances' meaning-making process, thus opening a discursive space for centrifugal discourses. To sum up, these practices, marked by accompanying lexical cues (see Baxter, 2011), often are microsites of discursive struggles. Therefore, they help locate competing discourses and more contextualized praxis.

3.1.3.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

A contrapuntal analysis is suited for the usual goals of an RDT study (i.e., identifying competing meanings and patterns of how they are enacted). With the added layers as explained at the end of Chapter 2 (i.e., exploring the situation and additional patterns), I also used a constructivist grounded theory approach that aimed at building knowledge from the ground up (Charmaz, 2017; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). A grounded theory or constant comparison approach is a discovery process *less bound by existing concepts*, unlike thematic analysis, although the multiple processes of coding data are very similar (Riessman, 2008). In particular, I align with the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017), which is particularly useful for revealing meaningful patterns and categories emerging through the communication between the researchers and participants. What makes a constructivist approach particularly suitable to the current project is that it requires researchers to be particularly sensitive to multiple perspectives (also taking into account researchers' positionality) and cultural constructions embedded in language throughout all stages of analysis. A constructivist approach also embraces the subjectivity of researchers and the intersubjectivity that characterizes any interaction, including an interview, which means to abandon the assumption that a researcher can be an objective observer outside of cultural constructions (e.g., instantiated in values, beliefs, knowledge) and the immediate phenomenon. Indeed, when conducting the interviews, researchers, through their

own performativity, are actively participating in the local construction of meanings and relationships or are part of the dialogue (Riessman, 2008; Tracy, 2013). On another level, the meaning generative dialogue involving the participants and researchers continues through analysis, as researchers try to make sense of already-spoken words (Baxter, 2011), also pulling from all kinds of cultural discourses (including academic discourses).

Ultimately, analysis as a form of sensemaking is shaped by researchers' own in-group/out-group identities, values, social locations, embodiments, politics, paradigms, and languages (Charmaz, 2017). Instead of seeing them as tarnishing the data, a constructivist approach utilizes them as sources of enriching the analysis. Constant comparison as a specific practice then entails intentionally and critically orienting to these layers of meanings and multiple perspectives in the process of creating and forming relations, and in the process writing down reflexive memos about why and how researchers arrive at some kind of interpretation. For example, most participants spoke of "family balance" as something career women needed to learn to maintain in their discussions of family responsibilities. My urge, informed by studies on phenomena such as "double-binds" and "the second shift" of working women (e.g., Desai et al., 2011; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Jamieson, 1995), was to code it as an idea or even myth perpetuating the domination over women's labor. However, I soon realized that "balance" could also be a more dynamic and meaningfully expansive process in participants' storytelling, and could indeed be transformative when specific participants were referencing a kind of balance maintained through negotiating with family members (instead of women doing it all) and/or enabled by their skillfulness in mobilizing resources.

Another example was the specific code of "queering," which I used to represent moments at which gender dualism and the binary categorization of male and female were disrupted by

specific accounts (e.g., the idea of having femaleness and maleness in one body), as my own political-intellectual choice encouraged by boundary-pushing theorists (e.g., Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018; Butler, 1999; Sedgwick, 1993). This practice might not even be intelligible to my participants, although “queer” and “LGBTQ+” have been translated/introduced into Chinese popular discourse. One more specific practice was to think further when using evaluative language, such as “progressive,” “dirty,” and “poor,” about who gets to make these evaluations enabled by what. Taking a constructivist grounded theory approach, I tried to engage with similar reflections throughout my analysis and interpretation (although it often is easier said than done).

Grounded theory approach or constant comparison typically involves three coding stages (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2019), free reading and highlighting of the data line by line (i.e., open coding), identifying links between codes and coded categories, and collapsing codes and categories by identifying shared properties (i.e., dimensionalization). These processes were easily integrated into the thematic analysis processes discussed earlier due to their similarities.

3.1.4 Positionality

Both the critical-interpretivist paradigmatic position that this project adopts and the use of constructivist grounded theory require me to reflect on my own positionality. Throughout all analytical stages, I must consider how my subjectivity and the processes through which I have come to be who I am (my identities) and where I stand (my social locations) inevitably shape my sensemaking of not only the data I collect, but also the decisions, designs, interactions, events, and so forth constituting this inquiry. I am, after all, actively and purposefully participating in the communicative process of the inquiry as an *author* who has most of the agency to change the flow of research activities. Instead of shunning away from my subjectivity, I embrace it as a

source of meaning and discourse; that is, my subjectivity depends on social identities to which I attach and how I act and understand are activated by discourses I internalized through socialization. I, too, am a situated, relational being. My subjectivity comes with inevitable limitations, as when I form an orientation, I am simultaneously orienting away from some other perspectives. In theory, I can practice reorienting to those that are backgrounded through reflexivity, examining why I understand something in certain ways. Lastly, I see each interview with my participants as a dialogical process through which intersubjectivity emerges whereby meaning co-construction occurs. My immediate co-presence is also inevitably shaping how participants express their identification.

Based on my engagement with this research project thus far, I have noticed several aspects of my identities that tended to be salient in my interactions with my participants (and other relevant individuals such as informants): my cis-male gender identification, my nationality, my affiliation with American higher education, my transnational experience, my identification with feminism, the generation to which I belong (Post-90s), and last but not least my (homo)sexuality and queerness. Being a cisgender male/man, I can never truly understand the *experiences* of women and the *situation* women are put into by an unjust gender structure and its many systems (e.g., family institution). As a native Chinese person, I do possess the cultural insights that allow me to quickly comprehend some tacit rules underlying Chinese social practices and processes (e.g., *guanxi* building). Being a North American-trained researcher, however, complicates my nationality. Participants sometimes associated me more with America or at least American institutions, which changed how they perceived my intention, cultural intelligence, loyalty, quality, and so forth. My identification with feminism also created some dynamics during interviews that I considered fascinating. While many participants felt

empowered or resonated with a few feminist arguments about gender equality and equity I shared with them, a few others also challenged what I learned from European and North American feminist theorists from their standpoint. Lastly, identifying as gay and queer, I may have been able to better empathize with other forms of marginalized experiences. On another level, I believe gender is never effortless.

In the next part, I experiment with reflexive autoethnographic writing to briefly show why this project matters to me personally.

3.2 “Bad” mother: An interlude

The door slams to wake me up from a half-asleep stage. Mom finally returns from her work! It’s 11:00 pm (maybe). As I hear her walk past my darkened room to their bedroom, I get up, half-awake, and traipse across the living room in my pajamas toward the grey iron door. The door can be locked three times with some interlocking mechanisms. For some unknown reason, I have developed a habit that I must systematically open and lock the door four times ($3 \times 4 = 12$) every night, which is quite odd for a sixth-grader. I close it, spin the lock knob to lock it once, twist a clicky switch on the square outer layer to lock it twice, and then spin a larger, heavy plastic switch to lock a third time. I repeat my actions, still half awake. I open the door ever so slightly to have a brief encounter with the dark outside a third time, and then quickly slam the door shut. Suddenly, an acute pain travels from my right index finger through my arm to strike my brain like lightning. I scream, before I can see my finger jammed into the lock. Dazed, I unlock the door to release my finger, which is all bloody, twisted, and swollen—with most of the nail and a lot of skin gone—as I examine it through my teary eyes. Still dazed, I turned around, only to see my mother stand there gasping, before letting out a cry.

We attribute factors to happenstances to make sense. To me, this painful finger-in-lock experience was a mere minor accident, which I attributed to my OCD (-ish) behaviors, my half-awake state, and the horror stories about burglary I heard. It was not until many years later that I learned about my mother's perception of that event. "Remember that time your finger got caught in the door?" She said, "That night, I thought about quitting my job. I thought it was all because I worked so late. I blamed myself for a long time for that." I was speechless for a second, and then said, "No, that was just my OCD." My mom replied, "I still feel I should be held accountable for that. I'm a bad mother."

My mother didn't quit her job after that night, but she has lived and *is still living* with a "bad mother (and also bad wife)" narrative that she had internalized long before the accident. Habitually, she would ask me, "Do you hate/blame me?" I replied, "Why are you asking such questions?" I replied, "Why would I hate you?" I replied, "No! How would I?" I also replied with silence out of irritation. But she would still ask, "Do you hate/blame me," and then say, "I'm not a good mother. I'm not a responsible mother." She says every time in a semi-joking manner, but do people linger on a joke for decades?

I think through my present feminism-infused mind and declare, "No, I do not blame my mother! I am proud of her achievements as a career woman! I couldn't be prouder that she's redoing gender..." However, reminiscing—symbolically and reflexively—through the 12-year-old me, I soon become crestfallen. One time, my mother and I had a huge fight so intense that she slapped me in the face (that was the only time she had ever struck me). Then she left, leaving me in rage in my room. My father quickly came, trying to calm me down, which was funny since he and I fought a lot. "Don't get mad at your mom...She's never struck you before...She just had a bad day...She doesn't feel well today." "I don't care. I don't care about her!" "Don't say

that—” “I don’t even care about if she’s dead or alive. She hasn’t been around anyway!” I don’t know who was more shocked by my words, myself or my father, and I don’t remember the rest, but these irreversible words have since been haunting me, sometimes yelling “hypocrite” in my face.

I might have indeed blamed my mother, tacitly and not necessarily consciously, in part due to having grown up in a Confucianist world where words (discourse) tell everyone that women are supposed to stay “inside” the domestic realm, to assist their husbands and rear their child; in part due to stories in storybooks tend to repeat that mothers are always staying in and around the house, cooking meals and nagging. But I grew up with a different, unrecognized kind of mother.

I must confess that I had for a time of my life felt aloof toward my mother. It took an ocean between us, one year after I moved from Changsha, Hunan, to San Diego, California, for me to realize I missed her. Then it only took me a week of family story writing, as a course project, for me to (re)discover the deep meanings embedded in the stories she had told me when I was a half-attentive child listener. Then I realized her stories had always been my stories, in part, and therefore our lives were meaningfully intertwined. We are(were) in linked lives.

However, the ongoing transformation of my understanding of my mother’s motherhood and womanhood did not begin until recent years when I began engaging more with feminist theories and gender studies. A cisgender male/man, I hadn’t given many thoughts about the processes that women had to go through, and the things women must work around in patriarchal realities. A more relational turning point was when I took a graduate seminar in career theory, which motivated me to have more conversations with mother about her work, her labor, her career process, and the ways in which she negotiated her paradoxical experiences, especially her

constant feelings of pride and regret. While she's proud of her career success and the high position she created for herself as a woman, she's simultaneously always regretting, once again, being a bad mother (and wife).

In 2017, I came out as gay to my parents in a forced way, when none of us were ready. My mother cried for days and said, "I feel so sorry. It's all my fault. It's all because of my career. I should've been around. I should've been a responsible mother." I told her, in a helpless way, that I was normal, it's natural, and I was and am healthy. But she would just say, "I'm sorry I ruined your life."

The career theory seminar happened after my coming out, by which things were relatively calmer. In one of our conversations, my mother said, "I used to feel proud of myself, proud of what I achieved as a professional woman, but recently I started feeling meaningless, and family is more important."

My (homo)sexuality, my queerness is an ongoing situation that my family is learning to live with. Mother stopped saying she ruined my life, but now when people compliment her for her career success, she always adds, "But I owe so much to my son. I should've been there for him when he was little."

I wish she knew that *now I know* she had always been there for me, as a good mother in an unrecognized, underrepresented way. In fact, it was one of the participants from the present project who helped me put my new realizations into words: "Who said good mothers must always stay around their kids?! If you want your child growing up to be excellent, isn't making it yourself more convincing?" My mother certainly made it and is still showing me how she's making it.

I wish my mother had more stories about womanhood (and motherhood) to draw from throughout the long work-life progress she traversed through. I wish there were alternative stories that tell *everybody* women do not have to live with inhibited intentionality anymore. I wish my mother could stop blaming herself and her career choice for either the evitable or inevitable things that happened to our family, such as her father's death and my gayness.

I know my mother isn't unique or alone in this experience; there are millions of Chinese women embodying the gendered situation in their own ways.

"You know who even faces more challenges than us?" Mother asked me during one of our career conversations rhetorically and continued, "Women entrepreneurs! You should interview them if you want to know more about Chinese professional women's experiences. People should hear more about their stories."

And so I did.

Chapter 4: Competing Discourses

In this chapter, I present findings that answer RQ1, which asks: What and where do competing discourses activate the meaning of “woman entrepreneur” as Chinese women entrepreneurs talk about their working lives? The “what” part of this question is the main goal of RDT studies. The added “where” orients to: (1) specific zones or spaces of social interaction often bracketed by specific locations (e.g., family home, workplace, shared public spaces of a community, a conference meeting); (2) more broadly to things or people or, in general, beings/bodies constitutive of a situation in which certain identities are activated (i.e., identification) by participants. Engaging with these details about different *situations* indeed is also practicing the intersectional analysis that Suter (2018) has tried to integrate with RDT’s contrapuntal analysis. RQ1 is answered in a classic RDT fashion, in that two overarching discourses (4.1 and 4.2) in dialectical positions are identified. Because of the rich layers, my findings are divided into two chapters, so Chapter 5 answers RQ2. In the next section, I begin answering RQ1. Table 3 below provides an overview of this chapter.

Table 3. RQ1 Findings Overview (Parts 1 to 3)

Part 1		
RQ1: What and where do competing discourses activate the meaning of “woman entrepreneur” as Chinese women entrepreneurs talk about their working lives?		
Competing Discourses Key Concerns	Discourse of Misalignment (DOM): Women Entrepreneurs as Misplaced Bodies	Discourse of Integration (DOI): Women Entrepreneurs as Agents of Change and Possibilities
General assumptions about femininity and women, essential traits, women’s presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Unsettled) Women and Femininity Unsettle Business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women Entrepreneurs and Femininity Enrich Entrepreneurship
Women’s gender roles inside and outside of the idea of home, role-related responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women Entrepreneurs Ruin <i>Nei-Wai</i> (Inside-Outside) Balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women Entrepreneurs Create New Family Harmony
Mother role and responsibilities, pregnancy, birth-giving body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motherhood is Incompatible with Entrepreneurship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motherhood and Entrepreneurship Complement Each Other
The nature/identity of jobs associated with women and femininity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women/Girls Need a Stable Job Instead of Ventures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women Seek Entrepreneurial Adventures
Larger sociocultural, socioeconomic traditions and movements relevant to Chinese women’s social participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women in the Face of Immovable Traditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women in the Wake of Progressive Changes

Table 3 (Continued)

Part 2 DOM: Women Entrepreneurs as Mislplaced Bodies		
Sub-Themes	Description	Example
(Unsettled) Women and Femininity Unsettle Business	Women’s embodied presence in entrepreneurial contexts soon became unsettling and even upsetting. Sitting at the center of the tension are the general assumptions constituting Chinese women (as a group or category), often associated with specific feminine traits/features/qualities and innate feminine behaviors that were taken for granted by both participants and their conversational partners. Women’s sexuality and sexualized bodies were also a source of unsettlement to specific and general others.	China is a patriarchal society...Chinese women do not really have this equality that appears on the surface [and] can do very little in terms of discourse [and] in the process of controlling/shaping the social system...in terms of social psychology, from the perspectives of those who in power, which is the social psychology that controls the social movement/trend and structure...women should mostly be conformists and companions—[that is, in] these kinds of social roles and positions...Even entrepreneurship should be male-dominated, where women are companions. A family should also be male-dominated, and a woman is a companion, a subordinate...however, if a woman becomes the leader, the role is reversed, [which]... is a major challenge [to] women who start entrepreneurship [as well as] men who are followers...
Women Entrepreneurs Ruin <i>Nei-Wai</i> (Inside-Outside) Balance	Challenges associated with maintaining a “balanced” (ping hen/平衡) relationship between career/work/business and family. Participants made present a causal relationship between entrepreneurial activities and the disturbed or even “shattered” (da po/打破) regular family balance/harmony associated with “traditional/conventional” (<i>chuan tong</i> /传统) values. <i>Note:</i> These values were invoked by several Chinese idioms/adages that dictated Chinese women’s social locations and duties, such as “男主外女主内” (a man masters the outside; a woman masters the inside), “相夫教子” (to assist one’s husband and educate the children).	The second difficulty is that others will misunderstand you. If a woman did/achieved something, I guarantee that you (the second person referring to a nonspecified addressee) would think in twisted ways, to think that [the woman] must have catered to some [unethical] means...society has some discriminations for women...and others may not necessarily perceive women entrepreneurs in good ways, saying, “Why would you, a woman, do this? You can totally be a housewife, staying at home, <i>xiang fu jiao zi</i> ? Why do you do this thing [business activities]?”

Table 3 (Continued)

<p>Motherhood is Incompatible with Entrepreneurship</p>	<p>Motherhood and pregnancy are deemed inevitable and essential to women. However, pregnancy was also considered a major disruption to women’s career (on a personal level, in which women’s birth-giving body became the issue), without imagining possibilities to reposition it in the grand relations of social production (e.g., policy change).</p>	<p>Pregnancy, I think, is a great challenge. Basically, you wouldn’t be able to concentrate on work for two to three years, resulting in you losing a relatively long “golden period” [for career development?], meaning you [experienced] a disjunction. Maybe two to three years after giving birth, when you come out again, your everything, including your “psychological construction,” would need to restart...</p>
<p>Women/Girls Need a Stable Job Instead of Ventures</p>	<p>The tension centers around the nature of entrepreneurship as an occupation and its relationship, indeed the lack thereof, with women and femininity. When participants communicated with others about their intention to venture into business, their conversational partners would show disapproval or at least a lack of understanding of their intention by stressing the idea that women/girls need a stable job.</p>	<p>When I just started my business, my mom did not agree, because I was very young, and then my mom strongly opposed [the move], thinking how could you, a girl, quit a job within the system? She couldn’t understand and thought it was beyond logic. She thought it would be too tough or something and worried and objected [my choice] a lot...the second thing was, my mom had experienced starting a business herself, and knew how brutal society could be, so she thought maybe girls- because in China, I don’t know about how things are like in other countries, [but] Chinese women [do not lead an easy life], do we? [You] gotta also take care of the family, [or else] others would say you got no <i>xian liang shu de</i> (virtues), wouldn’t they? Okay, then you also need to work well, and if not, your in-laws would look down on you [so would] your husband, wouldn’t they?</p>
<p>Women in the Face of Immovable Traditions</p>	<p>Participants’ concerns, worries, and anxieties about Chinese women’s (including women who are entrepreneurs) thwarted participation in social production (e.g., in the workforce). Their worries oriented to those more distal structures and institutionalized practices that were seemingly immovable due to their scale and depth.</p>	<p>I felt like subjectively speaking women in society were getting better and better, regarding their personal development and pursuit...but now I am confused, since the “second child” has been opened, the objective social condition again started limiting women’s development. Like, if you give birth to one child, there are four elders who help in childrearing, because it’s new to everybody so they fight for helping, isn’t it?...in fact, we thought to give women employees a bit more assistance and more understanding.</p>

Table 3 (Continued)

Part 3 DOI: Women Entrepreneurs as Agents of Change and Possibilities		
Sub-themes	Description	Examples
Women Entrepreneurs and Femininity Enrich Entrepreneurship	In this theme, participants' narratives rendered possible (and present) a reality in which women's bodily presence and femininity (taking a trait approach) became sources of enrichment to the current entrepreneurial practices (e.g., socializing, managing). Participants focused on foregrounding "women's unique advantages" characterized by stereotypical women's/feminine traits (e.g., soft, caring, loving) and associating desirable traits with women (e.g., resilience). Women's (bodily) presence itself discursively enriched entrepreneurship.	First, a woman is born with her sensitive aspects, and so she does better than men regarding relational communication...[Next], usually, women are stronger than men in seeing through who people really are, which again puts her at an advantage regarding managing an enterprise. You can use your own advantage to do better in team-building...for example, on some occasions, I've seen that when women meet, they will show each other enthusiasm and warmth [though] small talks or something, expressing their feelings. Normally when men meet, they still communicate, but their expression wouldn't be as warm...for example, at some conference panels, when [taking part in] some heated debates, women would think there should be a peaceful solution [and] it's unnecessary to be so heated, but men would be very confrontational, must arguing to figure out who's right and wrong...that's a social phenomenon I've seen.
Women Entrepreneurs Create New Family Harmony	Participants reconsidered the relationship between women's work and family lives, in their discussion of ideas of work-life/family balance and/or family harmony, as one that no longer featured a kind of rupture between these two spaces. Harmony and balance were treated as being relative, flexible, evolving, and co-created practices formative of new family harmony and <i>nei-wai</i> relations, rather than a fixed interpretation of the Chinese family traditions where balance and harmony were attributed to women staying inside to fulfill certain roles and responsibilities.	Oh no no no no no, it's impossible [that I do everything]! It's impossible that I come home to be the "amah" after I worked outside, absolutely not...I am the new kind [of housewife], rather than the pure kind that does all sorts of things at home...I'm not that diligent, nor am I that <i>xian hui</i> (virtuous, a gendered adjective). But we (family members) negotiate with each other and respect each other...indeed, family [and] marriage need management [so do] enterprises and everything else, nothing would grow into what you want it to be [without management] ...just like an enterprise, which is huge, isn't it, and then us managers need innovation, management skills, and organizing capabilities, don't we?

Table 3 (Continued)

<p>Motherhood and Entrepreneurship Complement Each Other</p>	<p>Participants demonstrated how motherhood identification and entrepreneurial activities might indeed complement each other in ways. Motherhood identification (e.g., highlighting her mother identity; claiming to be the mom in her company) was no longer a hindrance to work, business, and overall entrepreneurial activities. Rather, it might be a driver having sparked her entrepreneurial intention, a metaphor for her effective management and leadership at work, and a discursive resource for her organizational identification.</p>	<p>I provide them (daughters) with guidance using the way how I think...the other day I needed to give a speech [for] hundreds of commercial agents, and I really wanted my [younger] daughter to also attend, because it's best to enrich the experience of a 14-year-old...but if you just asked her, "Can you go listen to mommy's speech," that's not right, was it?... I'd say [instead], "Can you go help me by being an audience member and giving me some suggestions?"...After the speech, I'd ask her to give feedback, which is a type of guidance... after the speech, I asked her, "[nickname], [what kind of suggestion you have for me?]"...I asked her, "Alas, I felt my PPT was terrible. What do you think?" She said, "Well, I felt pretty motivated, and [the PPT] was necessary."</p>
<p>Women Seek Entrepreneurial Adventures</p>	<p>Participants expressed their lack of interest in stable jobs while claiming desires for ventures, adventures, and challenges, as they told stories about how they became rebellious daughters who disobeyed or disregarded their parents' wishes or even demands for keeping stable jobs to venture in entrepreneurship. On another layer, participants also told stories about how they enacted intentionality and agency, cultivated through work, to create and maintain the entrepreneurial life that they desired, despite challenges from both close relationships and China's complex environment for business (e.g., government as the most powerful stakeholder).</p>	<p>I just didn't listen to them and did my own things. The last words I gave them was "I'll pay the debt I owed myself, and I for worse or for better don't need you [to pay the debt]." Then I just did my thing and slowly proved myself and [in the process, their attitude] changed.</p>
<p>Women in the Wake of Progressive Changes</p>	<p>This theme featured participants' hopeful, optimistic envisioning of the future for Chinese women entrepreneurs and women in general regarding their participation in social production. Participants noted a growing presence of women entrepreneurs in recent years. They acknowledged larger productive social changes attributable to women's participation in social production.</p>	<p>Because the whole ecology is like that. If you...are outstanding, you can lead a large group of women to contribute [to society] in an equal way. Like Qunfei Zhou and Mingzhu Dong (two well-known women entrepreneurs), who can be considered being among the group of people leading the social trends...folks will see [their] breakthrough and no longer see [women participating in entrepreneurship] as some unique thing, thinking it's just fine and normal. [What's] used to be exceptions may become normal.</p>

4.1 Discourse of Misalignment (DOM): Women Entrepreneurs as Misplaced Bodies

Through a thematic analysis with an iterative approach, I identified a pair of competing discourses, each comprised of five sub-themes speaking against their counterparts in the opposingly positioned discourse. In section 4.1, I present the culturally dominant discourse in which a misalignment between women and the stereotypical femininity thought to be inherently attached to them, as well as the occupational identity of work and embodiment of this work identity (Ashcraft, 2013) that is perpetuated in the context of women's entrepreneurship. This section reveals not only rules and resources (necessarily discursive) of the identity of "(Chinese) woman" and identity of "entrepreneur" (structure) in their specific, nuanced forms, but also the challenged ways in which participants talked about (and aligned or did not align with) the contested "women entrepreneur" identity (identification). I also pay attention to other contextually and situationally salient layers or dimensions of identities (e.g., class; position) that matter to participants' experiences. Informed by SMI and considering the materiality of the discursive process of identity construction, I also foreground what is "situated" about the discourse, including considering the contexts and whereabouts of participants' interactions.

In what follows, I present the following discourses through which women entrepreneurs were rendered misplaced bodies: (1) (unsettled) women and femininity unsettle business; (2) women entrepreneurs ruin *nei-wai* (inside-outside) balance; (3) motherhood is incompatible with career; (4) women/girls need a stable job instead of ventures; (5) women in the face of immovable traditions.

4.1.1 (Unsettled) Women and Femininity Unsettle Business

In all participants' accounts, women's presence in entrepreneurial contexts (e.g., conducting business activities) soon became unsettling and even upsetting. It became clear that a troubled alignment between participants' gender identification (e.g., speaking of herself as a

woman; claiming stereotypical feminine “traits/qualities”) and their understandings of or their account in which they performed entrepreneurial identities (i.e., “*shen fen*”) had been created as they communicated with varied relational partners (e.g., parents, neighbors, business partners, industry) in different situations (e.g., business meetings, client meetings). Importantly, their specific social locations (e.g., class, business sector, generation) made one experience vastly different from another. For example, while the challenge in one account might be the ambiguous unfriendly attitude of a business partner, in another, it could be years of living as a social pariah (being treated as an “unclean” woman) because of entrepreneurial work. Nevertheless, these experiences shared one thing in common: A woman practicing entrepreneurial activities and embodying femininity (i.e., made present) would disturb communicators (e.g., evoking unpleasant feelings; disrupting assumptions, including the woman herself) within a specific or series of events.

What separates this subtheme from the others is that here sitting at the center of the tension are the general ideas, indeed assumptions, constituting Chinese women (as a group or category), often associated with specific feminine traits/features/qualities (特性/特征/素质) and presumably innate feminine behaviors that were taken for granted by both participants and their conversational partners in specific scenes. In interviews, such an association was captured by utterances that began with “women are...” or “women tend to be...” or similar expressions. In other sub-themes in this section, tensions move more to specific aspects of and about (Chinese) women and activities associated with this group, such as their gender roles and responsibilities (at home). In short, the tension here lies in the mere presence of women and femininity in a certain context.

First, participants showed a clear awareness of male dominance in business sectors and overall Chinese society and traditions attributable to ideas such as “men are superior to women or women are inferior to men or Male supremacy and female inferiority” (*nan zun nv bei*/男尊女卑). Most participants did not hesitate to be critical and call out patriarchy (*nan quan*/“男权”). For example, Boya (Post-70s) was the owner of a company/museum that aimed to develop and promote cultural products (e.g., handicrafts) associated with local/regional cultural traditions. While she acknowledged that “in these two years, in terms of the overall proportion...there are slowly more and more women among entrepreneurs following the high tides of careers in China,” she quickly named “male-dominance” because “there are mostly men on billionaires lists; the Central Committee members are mostly male” (this observation applies to the U.S. context, Yavorsky, 2019). Some participants were more cautious in or ambiguous about criticizing or even acknowledging systemic gender imbalance and/or sexism. Nevertheless, shared between these two attitudes was the understanding that women’s presence in business was “difficult,” often out of the ordinary, and might trigger negative evaluations and responses (e.g., disdain) from both specific relational partners and generalized others.

Dinchun (Post-70s), who runs a sports and cultural company, drew from her understanding of mass psychology to discuss how Chinese elites or decision-makers perceived the “roles” and “position” of Chinese women entrepreneurs.

China is a patriarchal society. *Although* we say that our so-called men-women equality, on the surface, is better than that in Europe and America, deep in the bone...this society is one that sees men as superior to women...Chinese women do not really have this equality that appears on the surface [and] can do very little in terms of discourse [and] in the process of controlling/shaping the social system...So, Chinese women entrepreneurs should be considered a group that seeks survival in a breach/gap (a narrow in-between space)... in terms of social psychology, from the perspectives of those who in power, which is the social psychology that controls the social movement/trend and structure... women should mostly be conformists and companions—[that is, in] these kinds of social roles and positions...Even entrepreneurship should be male-dominated, where women are

companions. A family should also be male-dominated, and a woman is a companion, a subordinate...however, if a woman becomes the leader, the role is reversed, [which]... is a major challenge [to] women who start entrepreneurship [as well as] men who are followers...

In her analytical observation, she addressed the distal, public discourses already existed in Chinese patriarchy, by whose order women were positioned as secondary to men in both business and family settings. Therefore, as she shifted to imagining proximal not-yet-spoken discourses (“men who are followers”) informed by the patriarchal discourse, women entrepreneurs, who locally played leading roles, enacted a “reversion” and therefore became a source of challenge.

Bing (Post-60s), the chair/founder of a multi-billion enterprise, considered various complexities regarding why and how women entrepreneurs might experience unsettlement, situated in different places. In the process, she called out patriarchy.

Alas, the word “entrepreneur” is gender-neutral, regardless of male or female, isn’t it, because the work you need to do and responsibilities to take are in fact the same...*however*, because social roles and family roles of men and women are different, as women, being entrepreneurs...the things you pay out are way more than men. Firstly, at home, as long as she has a child, she must take the mother role...and responsibilities... [different from fathers], mothers must accompany their children, watching them growing up... Secondly, [women’s] body structure (physical makeup?) is different from men’s. Like you men are tall, or something, and you can hold it up facing all kinds of pressures, but women sometimes can’t. For example, you encountered violence during a business trip. A man might be fine while, a woman, you’d [became a victim]. Thirdly, especially in China, it’s still a patriarchal society...in today’s Chinese society, although we say men-women equality on the surface, achieving equality is difficult. Because of this gender difference, when you [conduct some business], others either despise you or pity you, or even are jealous of you! [About doing] the same thing, if a woman did it while a man didn’t, the man’s self-esteem couldn’t take it. Some might look down upon you, no matter how great the thing you do. He just thought, who knows by what kind of [foul] means you woman did this and he might say, “Ugh, woman! This thing she does” [mimicking a harsh, belittling tone].

Bing referenced both distal and proximal discourses to demonstrate how and why the “gender-neutral” term “entrepreneur” had been gendered by gender dualism or the dichotomization of

women and men (and femininity and masculinity) based on assumptions of fixed roles and biological determinism and by patriarchy manifested in local interactions between men and women. Specifically, on the distal site, she called upon (and perpetuated) gender roles, including the only one (by the word “must”) way to perform motherhood and the discourse of biological determinism (female bodies are weaker). When considering the third reason, she first critiqued the discrepancy between the state discourse of “men-women” equality and the still “patriarchal society” and further provided an example on the proximal site of dialogue. It might be tricky to determine the time (already-spoken or not-yet spoken) of the utterances because she imagined a hypothetical interaction based on her past interactions (more examples from her later). Nonetheless, the unsettlement was clear in the hypothetical interaction.

About a quarter of participants themselves participated in perpetuating a misalignment between femininity and entrepreneurship by reciting, sometimes repetitively, trait-based assumptions about (Chinese) women. They would attach the negative linguistic forms of certain traits or qualities (e.g., nitpicking vs. meticulous) to women as a group, disassociating them from “entrepreneurial identity” (*qi ye jia/chuang ye zhe shen fen/企业家/创业者身份*) while (dis)associating themselves from these traits or associating their characteristics with stereotypical masculinity. In short, women bodies and stereotypical feminine traits were rendered unfit for entrepreneurship and bothering to themselves.

Hanchun (Post-60s) was the executive director of a multinational corporation. She associated being a woman with showing weakness and fragility:

At work, you can’t treat yourself as a woman too much, [thinking that] others need to take care of me, so I [act] 矫情 (dramatic/unreasonable?)...or like carrying stuff must be what men do. So when we go [on a business trip], we sometimes joke that, since we often drag a huge suitcase or something, sometimes we say we must both be able to act like a girl and act like a “*nv han zi*” (literal meaning: female man).

In this excerpt, she equated identification as a woman (“treat yourself as a woman) with performing fragility and dependency while enacting independence with masculinity. This association occurred in several other interviews, as later sections show, and is not unique to the current study at all. However, “*nv han zi*” (female man/dude), a hybrid term in popular culture that emerged from her attempt to disassociate herself from the femininity-fragility stereotype, might have the potential to move beyond dualism by reconsidering the association between masculinity and male bodies, activating instead a state out of the gendered order (discussed later).

Cuiwei (Post-80s), president of a chamber of commerce, also had a similar assumption about women when answering the question, what experiences would you share if you were talking to a group of women who intended to start entrepreneurship:

Cuiwei: I think [you] must be hardworking and mustn't be afraid of difficulties to achieve success...nowadays, especially young women dread difficulties a little much.
Regular women still can't handle many hardships.
Zhenyu: Hmm, regular men also/
Cuiwei: Men have a stronger spirit for overcoming hardships.
Zhenyu: Is that right?
Cuiwei: Yeah, men can handle hardships better than women.

Despite my probes, in this specific exchange, she insisted on disassociating “regular” and “young” from important qualities and trait-based behaviors that “men have” and that were necessities for success.

Further, when answering the same question, Bing listed a few trait-based biases that the “outside world” (distal-already spoken) have attached to women, such as being “petty” (小气) and “fragile,” while stating firmly that women must “be warned of” and “forsake” them (to reject or negate, see later). I asked whether she thought these biases were valid, and her response was conflicted and intriguing:

Bing: They are invalid, but some things are indeed genetic. Like for instance, women like to sweat the small stuff and nag, which are what a lot of women do (“have” in Chinese); however, as a woman entrepreneur, you mustn’t [do/have these], or else you won’t be an entrepreneur.

Zhenyu: Why do you think these are genetic?

Bing: Because you are a mother, who’s in charge of the detailed stuff, because you are very detailed at home, but if you were still this detailed in the company, about running an enterprise, there would be some problems. Like in terms of utilizing people (human resources?), you forever looked for their weaknesses, which would make progression difficult. Running an enterprise, you must magnify their merits while weaken their weaknesses to achieve progress, because everybody has strong and weak points! So, woman, you shouldn’t put your detail-oriented attention to—it depends. It’s right to attend to details regarding quality (of products?), but it’s better to look at the big picture when it comes to treating people.

Here, Bing struggled a bit through talking about biases against women. She negated them only to immediately agree with them, even seeing a specific communication pattern, nagging, as being genetic. On a side note, associating women with nagging because of the mother role also occurred in other interviews. The fact that she saw women were prone to triviality by “genetic” makeup showed how normalized the biased discourse of biology and essential traits were. Ironically, her explanation drew on social construction to consider the emergence of subjectivity through repeating role-related activities (“Because you are a mother, who’s in charge of the detailed stuff, because you are very detailed at home”). Regardless of her intellectual alignment, women’s detail orientation in this specific account was rendered only sensible at home by her, while not so much in running an enterprise.

This troubled alignment between participants’ gender and occupational identities has also been reinforced on specific occasions that would otherwise be considered professional (e.g., a business meeting). Many participants had experienced being addressed in ways that made them feel a range of negative emotions (e.g., from slight discomfort to disgust) in varied ways in business by both men and women due to their gender identities. Conversely, their presence as

women conducting business activities made other co-present actors feel unsettled in ways (e.g., surprised, upset, jealous).

Before starting her own business, Shanglan (Post-60s) was one of the selected few female professionals (started as an analyst and then sales representative) in a state-owned chemical plant, in a male-dominated environment typical of state-owned enterprises. Like her colleagues, she regularly needed to travel to other provinces for business. However, being a woman conducting business for a state-owned enterprise came with additional financial burdens during these business trips, when China's market economy was still on paper (during the 1980s). Although she had the fixed budget (58 yuan/less than a dollar per day) for business trips matching her mid-level position, she could not find anyone to split the cost or combine resources like what her male colleagues would normally do, because "no one wanted to go on business trips with female comrades" since "[men] can't share a [hotel] room with a woman." Therefore, Shanglan always went on trips by herself to Guangdong or Guangxi (leading areas in the formation of the market economy). Being a lone businesswoman, however, had turned her into a target of other women's curiosity:

I carried a bag and went to a formaldehyde factory. Those accountants at the factory, some female comrades, saw me and was like, "Wow!" How curious they were, like, "Wow, are you all by yourself on this business trip?" I said, "That's right!" She meant a female comrade going out for a business trip was a marvelous thing to them, you know. So, it's not only discrimination, but the general public in Guangdong and Guangxi thought so too—a female comrade coming out for a business trip all by herself. They thought it's incredible...female comrades in Guangdong and Guangxi just stayed at home, you know...working as accountants or similar jobs, not going out for business...and only male comrades would be outside running...it's a regional thing. They thought women going on business trips, "how strange, wow, all alone by herself!" and let alone the unit (company). So many things, the leaders thought, were better for men to do hahaha [lowering her voice].

In this vivid story, Shanglan focused on the utterances (literal) from her women colleagues in different firms and geo-cultural contexts, who were specific conversational partners in past

interactions (proximal-already spoken). As she made clear in the story, a woman going out on a business trip all by herself was an unusual, unbelievable, and strange event. The “going out” (*chu qu*/出去) in this story was worth further consideration regarding the relative spaces and locations as in what was considered inside and outside. Shanglan was not only outside of the home space to which women were attached but also the cultural and geographic borders of her province in a time (and space) when traveling was much inhibited by undeveloped traffic, adding to the amazement factor.

Her mere turning up (to be physically present) triggered amazement in others and disrupted local discourse regarding women’s work. Her own interpretation of staying at home or going outside in the context of work was also intriguing. To her, (women) working in stable positions (e.g., accountant) in a local firm, compared to going on business trips, was the same as staying at home/not going out. This interpretation could simultaneously perpetuate and disrupt the association between women and home/inside space. On one level, women’s labor was still framed as being inside; nevertheless, the border of the “inside” expanded to enable women’s participation in social production. Importantly, although she seemed to be more entertained by their responses at the point of storytelling, she might have experienced unsettlement as she associated these proximal interactions with discrimination embedded in public discourse and specific discriminative practices at work.

Shanglan’s experience gave a glimpse into the past, but similar ideas in the present occurred when women were disassociated from entrepreneurial activities, especially for younger participants (e.g., Post-80s and -90s), whose businesses were still in or not far from the startup stage. For example, at the time when the interview took place, Hai (Post-80s) and her team were preparing for the opening of their private school, and she related the following experience:

...I think, in traditions, society as a whole doesn't acknowledge and trust women's abilities enough. Especially some government departments still prefer male[s] ("prefer male" was in English). I can feel that. And [they] may think you are a little girl; how can a girl hold up so much? Many people thought I was Post-90s, but I'm Post-80s, and then I told them I'd been a professional for more than a decade. Maybe after I told them about my educational background, they wouldn't [question me as much?] ...to be frank, sometimes if you didn't reveal your identity, they thought you were just a clerical worker and so would ignore you.

In this excerpt, Hai started with addressing distal-already, societal level discourse in which women's abilities were not acknowledged and trusted. Then her account moved more toward proximal interactions with specific members of organizations she worked with, in which she experienced being ignored and disregarded even in her leadership position (as the owner of a business), an experience shared by many women business owners (e.g., Jones & Clifton, 2018). In this context, China's specific generation categorization also came into play to determine Hai's perceived legitimacy. Her youthful and feminine appearance ("little girl") became a source of others' suspicion (where I saw unsettlement), which made her perform additional identity work by revealing her identities and experiences.

Another Post-80s participant, Yun, who runs an online trading company, shared cases involving the tension between her all-women negotiation team and business partners in the context of international collaboration:

I found through the process of interacting with a French [company], also including a Czech [company], that, if that's an international [business negotiation?], they were mostly men doing/like women were more likely [playing the] assistant [role]. It's all men making the decisions during the business negotiations...I didn't realize that the first few times and then later felt, OK, their attendees were all men, so then maybe it's kind of wrong that ours were all women. Also, [during negotiation], [although] I couldn't tell that their words were a bit belittling since my English wasn't that good, our doctor (a member who has a Ph.D.) was like, "Well, their words weren't that polite."

Because of these experiences, she purposefully started including male members who were not specialized in business negotiation from a different department just to be present at similar

international meetings, to boost the legitimacy of their all-women negotiation team. Through these meetings, Yun's perceived alignment between women bodies and business had been changed/challenged communicatively by multiple agents, such as: (1) the collaborators' practices of all men making decisions while all women serving as assistants; (2) the expertise on her team, who could sense the belittlement in their collaborators' words. While the international (male) collaborators acted unprofessionally, it was her all-women negotiation team that was alienated from legitimate bodies and rendered "kind of wrong" through these interactions. Ironically, the mere presence of male bodies became a solution.

Yun's accounts also brought in complexities involving gender and organizing in the context of globalization. Here, the proximal addresses were international clients, whose hostile view on women's participation in business could no longer be associated with Chinese traditional cultures, which took much blame for regressive treatments of Chinese women. This account challenged a lot of my participants' assumptions in which European and North American practices were associated with progression, while Chinese historical and cultural traditions with regression. Admittedly, in interviews, I, too, tended to frame sexist, regressive practices as traditional.

Unsettlement was also the undertone of the experience of "the only woman" or "too few women" in an industry that around a quarter of the participants shared explicitly. The complex feelings (e.g., pride and anxiety) associated with these experiences were heightened on occasions where many bodies come together (e.g., the annual convention of industry) to form the landscape of specific industries characterized by gender imbalance.

As a well-known figure and a rare woman leader not only in her industry but also across sectors, Hanchun was labeled by the media and her colleagues a "*mei nv zong cai*/美女总裁

(beauty + CEO/president)” and a “goddess” of the specific industry. She had mixed feelings toward these “gendered labels.” On the one hand, she felt empowered by positive comments and meanings that came with these labels, for example, being told that she was “a clear stream in our industry” (*yi gu qing li*/一股清流), “a stroke of color” (*yi mo liang se*/一抹亮色) “a flower among a grass sea” (*wan lv cong zhong yi duo hua*/万绿丛中一朵花) and deemed them acknowledgment to her excellence and contribution. She also felt the immense respect and appreciation her colleagues and other parties have for her when they, for example, put her at the “central spot” when taking a group picture or invited her to TV shows and important forums. On the other hand, however, she felt tired of “always” being invited to be the stroke of color for these occasions and the extra attention. She stated:

I indeed hope more women can turn up (she used “come out” in Chinese) together, because, when it’s only you, you get all the special attention, but in fact, I have the personality that does not really enjoy the attention, so I hope more folks, more women, can share this attention. Personally, I also often give more care to our female employees, exactly because as a woman I know it’s not easy for them to get a foothold in the workplace and society. I hope more of them can walk onto the front and back stages.

Although Hanchun stated that she never experienced discrimination, she might know how it felt like to be treated as a token representation of women in an otherwise masculine arena, whose gender was unnecessarily highlighted, sometimes becoming the sole focus. The words others used to describe her also turned the successful women entrepreneurs into rare species while their presence highly unusual event, perpetuating the normalized position of male bodies. Hanchun may not necessarily align with this radical interpretation; however, she was aware that there should be more women in her industry to normalize women’s presence.

Shanglan echoed Hanchun’s experience and view in her account of being one of the few women in her industry. When asked about the occasions on which her gender identity would become salient when participating in entrepreneurial activities, she answered:

I do have a lot of feelings about that! For example, when I attend the conferences of Sinopec (a leading state-owned enterprise in China)...I look around to see more men than women...there are only a few women...right! There are maybe three to five women, who have their own companies, sitting in the entire conference room!...I felt pretty proud of myself, feeling, *alas, I'm not bad*. I have my spot in the Sinopec system as a woman comrade, which is not bad. On the other hand, though, I truly felt, the proportion of my fellow women is way too low, WAY TOO LOW!...maybe it has something to do with our industry, but I guess, which industry's women can achieve [equality] really not that many...it's far too early to claim, "half the sky."

In this account, Shanglan expressed the pride and discomfort she felt associated with being one of the only few women in her industry, situated in a place she visited annually where the sheer disproportion of women to men ratio became tangible. Interestingly, this blunt reality made her challenge the Maoist slogan of "women hold up half the sky" that endorses (and sometimes used to misrepresent) the gender equality movements in China (Tian & Bush, 2020). In this account, the utterances came from the proximal bodily presence of women and men, which brought a crucial question to a distal-already spoken discourse.

Lastly, women's sexuality and sexualized bodies might also be a source of unsettlement to specific and general others, and, in turn, be used to delegitimize their entrepreneurship and labor. Importantly, regional cultures also shaped how participants experienced the disturbance associated with their sexuality and sexualized bodies. For instance, while some participants gained the awareness of the possible stigma attached to businesswomen's and/or career women's sexuality, a few heard derogatory terms (e.g., "whore, prostitute") used on women who ventured out of a local community (e.g., a village) for opportunities. Yet another had for years lived as a social pariah, labeled as an "unclean woman," across communities, at the beginning of her entrepreneurial process.

For starters, many participants shared that they felt anxious about, or at least they were aware of the assumption that businesswomen would cater to unethical means, involving

exchanging sexual favors with men in positions of power (e.g., male leaders in government departments), to achieve goals. The voice usually came from the distal sites, in the forms of rumors and gossips without clear references. For example, Congfei knew too well how it felt like to be the target of these rumors:

Sometimes, when you succeeded, there were rumors and slanders saying whether you succeeded [because of] your appearance. They couldn't see your suffering and bitterness...many people said behind your back that... 'You could achieve this only because you depended on someone or some [government] leader...in their eyes, [your success] was spoiled.

These words that she heard made her feel “unacknowledged” both “physically and psychologically” as a women entrepreneur. Similar voices and a suspicion surrounding the legitimacy of women’s success in business and other activities, based on the sexualization of women bodies in male-dominated contexts (Mavin et al., 2014), induced unpleasant feelings such as awkwardness and anxiety in many participants. These feelings could be heightened on private occasions (e.g., office; private room at a restaurant) involving the immediate co-presence of male stakeholders (e.g., male government leader) for their business and specific projects. For example, to a lot of participants, attending private business meals or dinner parties (*chi fan/fan ju*), which was a fundamental *guanxi* building/networking practice in China¹⁷ (Yau et al., 2000), was an activity characterized by the saliency of their gender identities and woman bodies, where they felt most awkward and challenged. Participants themselves might also perpetuate these biases by saying things such as “[my parents] absolutely would not allow me to utilize some so-called women’s advantages to achieve goals, such as selling your [body]” (Hai; she also

¹⁷ Getting extravagant (e.g., as much as \$900, Lam, 2009) dinners (or other meals) together, as a practice of the “wine and dine” culture in Chinese business (von Weltzien Hoivik, 2007), is a normalized way to build and maintain *guanxi* and conduct business. Often, business discussions happen at the dinner table. In 2017, President Xi, Jinping launched a new policy that intended to intervene in this practice in public sectors and institutions, as part of the national anti-corruption action. For example, drinking at lunches becomes forbidden when government officials are involved.

disassociated herself from this practice). For another example, some participants mentioned/assumed/hinted and judged other women colleagues (harshly or ambiguously) they knew who liked to “create scenes” for “these things” (hinting at utilizing sexuality in one’s favor).

Additionally, the sexualization of businesswomen through these discourses seemed to have formed a powerful (self-)disciplinary practice tacitly used on and by women entrepreneurs, sometimes preventing them, especially young ones who were not yet established, from accessing resources and opportunities embedded in male-dominated networks, to stay clean. For example, Pinghui, a young woman (Post-80s, close to Post-90s), avoided interacting with most male government leaders and other stakeholders by herself to evade slanders that existed before; her divorced status would only invite more suspicions. Jiefei, who was also divorced, gave up upon projects during her earlier years in business when encountered with “awkwardness” involving male stakeholders with ulterior motives, who could not “keep their hands to themselves” (动手动脚). Many participants shared similar “awkward” experiences (indeed, sexual harassment) due to the sexualization of women's bodies in male-centered business socializing. It is important to note that many such occasions revealed competing discourses sometimes through the mere presence of male and female bodies without any uttered words.

However, more bluntly uttered, even in forms of direct verbal aggressions, was that women who “went out” of the borders of home-related spaces (i.e., family home and hometown) to explore opportunities were unclean/tarnished women or even “hookers/prostitutes.” Because of the proximity to male bodies in business activities, women entrepreneurs might be perceived as “*bu shou fu dao*/不守妇道” (not keeping woman’s ways/virtues) and face different degrees of disciplinary punishment. In Tianjing’s hometown back in the late 1990s to early 2000, villagers

would call inland women who earned money in Guangdong and neighboring areas (costal, more developed cities) “*ji/chicken*” (i.e., Chinese equivalent for “hooker” or promiscuous woman) and say that their money was filthy money not earned by “real skills.”

In a more extreme case, Bijun narrated in tears her traumatizing experiences of living as a pariah and a family black sheep for years, only because she was an “18-year-old village girl” who went to the “big capital city” for opportunities. To leave the poverty-stricken life in her village, Bijun “came to the capital city without a single dime” while not “knowing anybody” against her family’s (parents and brothers) will and was willing to “take jobs like sweeping the streets or cleaning the toilets to live in the city.” However, she was rejected by the new community:

I was only 18 when I came to this city...everybody was saying that this country girl, maybe not looking bad and young, did not keep women’s ways...They thought you were not a well-behaved woman...not a clean woman...So, when I usually went there to buy green onions or get water [from a public fountain], they had to say, whenever I went, “These things need to be washed again,” or they looked at [me] discriminatively... [those neighboring “aunties and grandmas”] said, “Our water’s gonna be contaminated by you”...whenever I touched the [publicly shared] tap water faucet (a time when tap water at home was not common).

Because she started from running a small breakfast stall, accessibility to water was critical to her business; however, she could only go get water late at night when others went to sleep. But

One summer night, at around 1:00 am, I went to get the water, but the faucet had already been [damaged] by someone and it broke upon I twisted it...I tried to wrap it up so it wouldn’t make noise, but an old lady [living nearby] heard the rushing water and got up [to check what’s going on]. The moment she saw it was me, she started scolding, yelling “You filth/scum! Look at you, wasting all the water!” She said, “You must pay for it,” asking me to pay three yuan (less than half a dollar) right there. Back then...my profit of a month could barely make three yuan...Since then, I had to go get water from the river that’s [4 kilometers/2.5 miles] away.

What hurt her even deeper was that her family also considered her going to the city and moving in with a man (cohabitation without marriage) as having brought profound shame to the family

name. One time when she went back home, her father threatened to drown her (an old-time punishment for “unclean women”), which pushed her to attempt suicide by drinking a whole bottle of pesticide. Her family rushed her to the hospital and she barely survived. After this event, her family decided not to push her anymore but also burned bridges with her (until years later, she returned as a locally renowned restaurant owner).

My interview with Bijun was fully unstructured (I asked two questions), as she spent three hours telling me stories of her many “traumas” (创伤) and struggles intertwined with periodic successes and joys as she lived as a woman entrepreneur who came from nothing and “had no background” (i.e., without available *guanxi* connections and resources). Although participants experienced the same type of unsettlement (here, rooted in the sexualized stigma attached to women who ventured out), their experiences varied greatly depending on the multiple social locations (e.g., class, rural-urban divide, regional culture) in which they found themselves.

4.1.2 Women Entrepreneurs Ruin Nei-Wai (Inside-Outside) Balance

Challenges associated with maintaining a “balanced” (*ping hen*/平衡) relationship between career/work/business and family quickly surfaced in most interviews. Granted, the interview protocol did include questions about participants’ family life and responsibilities, based on work-life literature and studies on career women’s experiences of double binds (e.g., Berkelaar & Tronstad, 2017; Jamieson, 1995). However, many participants began to reflect on the (troubled) relationship between their work and family life or more specifically the competing roles they must play at work and home as soon as they started describing how they understood the concept of “women entrepreneur.” Participants *made present* a causal relationship between their entrepreneurial activities and the disturbed or even “shattered” (*da po*/打破) regular family balance or harmony associated with “traditional/conventional” (*chuan tong*/传统) values. These

values were invoked by several Chinese idioms/adages that dictated Chinese women's social locations and duties, including “男主外女主内” (a man masters the outside; a woman masters the inside), “相夫教子” (to assist one's husband and educate the children), “夫唱妇随” (the husband to sing and the wife to follow), and “嫁鸡随鸡嫁狗随狗” (married to a rooster, follow the rooster; married to a dog, follow the dog). Importantly, family balance and harmony did not just entail spousal and parent-child relationships but took more concerted forms to include the family of origin and in-laws and ideas such as family honor in a local community. I intentionally separated this theme and the next one that focused on motherhood struggles, although participants' reflections on motherhood concerns were usually adjacent to family concerns, to resist the already taken-for-granted women's mother role (i.e., women must be mothers). In short, in this sub-theme, tension exists as taken-for-granted discourses about how Chinese women should participate in family life and their involvement in career and business development clash in participants' negotiation of family-work relationships.

In participants' narratives, women's occupation in entrepreneurship and just women having careers, in general, were described in ways as though they must pose a threat to stable, satisfying family relationships, in both the rhetorical situation of the interviews and recalled interactions between themselves and proximal and distal conversational partners (i.e., made present by multiple agents). For instance, Qunxi (Post-80s), owner of an online trading platform for agricultural products, framed the incompatibility between entrepreneurship and family life in a humorous word play. To understand the word play, we must know that “entrepreneur” is commonly translated into two words, “*qi ye jia*” (企业家) and “*chuang ye zhe*” (创业者), the former describes more established entrepreneurs who tend to be at least locally influential figures while the latter is more for owners of a startup business and/or SMEs (SME owners can also be

influential). The focus here is the first translation, whose third symbol/character “*jia*”—commonly symbolizing the concept of “family”—is also used for denoting the identity of an expert in a certain field. “*Qi ye*” itself usually means “enterprise” or “business.” What Qunxi did was cunningly switching between these two meanings:

We (maybe referencing to her friends or colleagues) often joke that Chinese entrepreneurs/*qi ye jia* only have the “enterprise/*qi ye*” without the “family/*jia*,” because work is too busy and tiring, so there’s no time for taking care of your own small family (nuclear family)... basically, all your thoughts were on the development of your own enterprise, to seek survival.

In her word play, which sounded to be shared among people around her, Qunxi turned entrepreneurship and family into mutually exclusive ideas. Meanwhile, however, she, like most other participants, understood that in social discourse, women who were employed were also expected to take care of the family, or else would be deemed lacking “*xian liang shu de*” (virtues) by “others.” These competing ideas, then, situated women entrepreneurs in a paradoxical context, torn by contradictory expectations. Another similar but way less playful framing of the tear between family and entrepreneurship used by several participants was “sacrifice,” as in: “To be a successful entrepreneur, I think it’s not easy. The baseline is that you sacrifice your family, the ties with your loved ones... including less attention that you pay to your family relationships” (Pinghui, Post-80s). Pinghui was speaking from the perspective of a divorcee and she deemed divorce a misfortune in her life. However, some participants (e.g., Aixiang) who were satisfied with their marital life still used “sacrifice” to frame the relationship between family life and entrepreneurial life.

As already discussed in the first sub-theme, the underlying assumption revealed through participants’ narratives was that women only belonged in the family context and that their labor only made sense in the *nei*/inside space, according to traditional values, captured by the idioms

and ideas such as “*xiang fu jiao zi*/相夫教子” (to assist one's husband and educate the children).

It is worth noting that this exact idiom was invoked by half of the participants, while all participants negotiated the ideas associated with it to different extents, some briefly whereas some others extensively. The specific idiom along with the ideas and activities it capsulate could be used to negate women's presence in business and “the outside.” For example, Wenhui (Post-60s) summarized three difficulties that women entrepreneurs were prone to face based on her own experiences as a woman who experienced being laid-off, struggling to start her business, and now running a stabilized travel and rental company:

The second difficulty is that others will misunderstand you. If a woman did/achieved something, I guarantee that you (the second person referring to a nonspecified addressee) would think in twisted ways, to think that [the woman] must have catered to some [unethical] means...society has some discriminations for women...and others may not necessarily perceive women entrepreneurs in good ways, saying, “Why would you, a woman, do this? You can totally be a housewife, staying at home, *xiang fu jiao zi*? Why do you do this thing [business activities]?”

In this symbolic dialogue involving women entrepreneurs as a group and general others, “*xiang fu jiao zi*/相夫教子” (to assist one's husband and educate the children) and staying at home became reasonable activities for women while their entrepreneurial achievement, the things they do other than *xiang fu jiao zi*, unintelligible. This specific idiom reoccurs throughout these findings in other themes. In short, participants presented the biased assumption that Chinese women should stay at home. Qiang's interview demonstrated a very similar understanding:

I think, about the positioning of women entrepreneur and entrepreneur, whether you are a man or woman, your social identity must be the same, *entrepreneur*. *But*, in China, first of all, you are talking about the issue of men-women equality, aren't you...China has been a male-dominated society for all these years, and women, if going back [in time] further, couldn't even *pao tou lu lian*/抛头露面 (show one's face in public). So, when a woman entrepreneur participates in entrepreneurial, business activities, she likely has more difficulties than men...many people may not be willing to collaborate with her

thinking you are a woman entrepreneur...others would think: A woman, why bother come out for some business? Why can't she just stay home? Many people think like that.

I asked whether she experienced this herself, she said "yes, I have" confidently. In her experience, the tension between women being outside and the sumptuous utterance, "Why can't she just stay home," from others rose again.

Another common phrase that perpetuates women's belongingness to the familial realm of the inside is "*nan zhu wai nv zhu nei*/男主外女主内" (a man masters the outside; a woman masters the inside). This expression directly dictates the activities (what they do/perform) of women and men in relation to the inside-outside relation. Although only four participants used this specific expression, (struggling) discussions about the contradiction between women being active in the outside (e.g., "在外面跑" "running around outside") and women *balancing* family life and work or maintaining family harmony were prominent in most interviews.

Congrong specifically reflected on the *nei-wai* dynamic in China and how women entrepreneurs in the context of heterosexual marital relationship might struggle in this dynamic.

When asked about how she understood the idea of "women entrepreneur," she responded:

About women entrepreneurs, I think, because in China, women entrepreneurs are indeed breaking the norms, regarding the social roles that women take, because usually, it says, "*nan zhu wai nv zhu nei* [a man handles/masters the outside; a woman handles/masters the inside]," isn't it? But then a woman entrepreneur, she'd participate more in social activities, so she'd *zhu wai* (master the outside), and then she'd be negated by the traditional values...in China [others?] would say a lot like, "It's not good that a woman being too dominant, which does not benefit the family harmony. Your husband would think that you were too dominant and that he couldn't control you." But as a woman/so I think it's very hard for women entrepreneurs to break through these [ideas]. Why did the other day the investor [referring to a person whom we attended a dinner party with] say that he invested in 30 plus enterprises, but two women entrepreneurs were still not listed? ... He said he admired their perseverance, but his subtext was women entrepreneurs had constraints/limitations because ordinary women couldn't break through these [ideas], although she had thoughts, she herself would be held back by those traditional things and outside opinions.

In this excerpt, *nan zhu wai*, *nv zhu nei* was invoked by Congrong as a social discourse (distal-already spoken) that framed gender norms and women's social roles confined within the inside, familial space. She was also critically aware that, from this perspective, women entrepreneurs whose activities were primarily located outside became rule-breakers who would face punishment in terms of both distal and proximal discourses (i.e., negated by traditional values, people around them, and spouse) and possibly relational consequences they produce. By further bringing in the utterances from another proximal interaction, she made clear that women's understanding of their roles based on conventional *nei-wai* relationship form inhibition to their entrepreneurial development.

Congrong (and other participants) further brought up another layer of complexity considering the changing *nei-wai* boundary and expectations for women regarding family roles.

About family roles, we talked about “*nan zhu wain nv zhu nei*” in the traditional sense, but I think as time processes, more often there's no inside and outside anymore, and in fact, men require women to both *zhu wai* and *zhu nei* (masters both the outside and the inside). He has more demands... if you only *zhu nei*, he would think you had no contribution to the family. “I am so exhausted [working] outside every day. I earn money to support this family...but you can't share my burden at all. I am exhausted too [facing] huge social pressure.

To Congrong, in this newly emerged *nei-wai* relation, Chinese women faced competing expectations in a very double-bind fashion. It was intriguing that she relied on the symbolic husband/man to discuss *nei-wai* dynamics and relational consequences, although being very critical of how gender roles framed by *nei-wai* relation were constraints to women entrepreneurs. That is, she could not think about women's family roles outside of the context of heterosexual (heteronormative) marriage, where men's dominance/control over women was also perpetuated. Congrong was not at all unique in the ways how she thought about women entrepreneur's relationship to family roles and responsibilities. Indeed, nearly all participants reflected on

multiple roles, competing demands, and overall work-family struggles, usually in paradoxical ways in that they might immediately perpetuate ideas sustaining the current gender order that puts women in perplexing locations right after they critiqued them.

For example, similar to Congrong, Cuiwei critiqued that “today’s women face harsher demands” despite “men-women equality¹⁸ requirements,” in that not only must they “follow ‘*san cong si de*/三从四德’ (the three obediences and the four virtues) [and] bearing children,” but they also “take the social part of the responsibilities (i.e., work).” Nevertheless, while she’s critical of the harsher gendered expectations, she quickly stated, “If a woman wants to create achievements in society [or] in an enterprise and to have a foothold, [she] still needs to make more efforts than men. First of all, we need to take care of the family because *family is the key...*” By saying so, she reinforced the idea that women’s primary role is the family caretaker. Going back to the consequence imagined by Congrong, it was tragic that a real-life extreme case shared by Ruoyun fit the description. A young woman who worked in a managerial position expecting promotions in her company quit her job to be a full-time mother, only to end up being bullied by her in-laws for not contributing to the family financially. The woman fell into postpartum depression for compounded reasons, including her lost career and her family’s bullying, and ended her own life by jumping off the 32nd floor of a building.

In short, women entrepreneurs in this study and other women’s stories they told revealed a rupture they felt between competing family and work lives and the challenges they must negotiate. These findings were hardly new and unique in research on women’s careers. What was unique in this context were the specific phrases/words/adages/idioms that triggered participants’ highly contested sensemaking and the ways how they negotiated them in relation to their

¹⁸ Participants tended to say “men-women equality (男女平衡)” instead of “gender equality (性别平衡).”

entrepreneurship. The conflict seemed, to me, to lie in the discrepancy between the contemporary demands for women's labor outside the home and the conventional discourses continuously talking about women's roles and labor in familial terms.

While it was easy to only consider *nei-wai* dynamics in terms of (heterosexual) spousal relationships, there were a variety of family conflicts that participants shared involving adult daughters and sisters negotiating the control of parents. For example, participants commonly experienced disapproval, disagreement, and misunderstanding from parents and sometimes siblings at the beginning of their venture (more in a later subtheme), whose disagreement also stems from family discourses. An especially interesting case was shared by Peiran, a Post-90s young woman who just started a company specializing in developing early childhood education products, not long after she returned to China from studying abroad in the United States. Her start-up experience, however, was not understood and even acknowledged by her mother, who had been ironically a first-generation woman entrepreneur. Her mother's lack of understanding was in part rooted in the view of “*shen me nian ling gan shen me shi*/什么年龄干什么事” (one does what suits their age), entailing getting married and having children, which has been a source of conflict between Peiran and her mother:

Usually, I ignore her...or bring up some irrelevant, random things since she can't really control you about this, but sometimes she'd trick [me] to do the matchmaking, you know? She knew too well that I told her I wouldn't attend matchmaking, but she'd trick me sometimes like, “I have a friend visiting” or things like “networking” and “come over,” but then I got there and, “So, this is the guy whose picture you showed me before.” So, it's very awkward...I think your family must be panicking [when you are] around 30 years old...there aren't many women starting businesses, and especially in China, many women take for granted that around 30 is the time for getting married and having children. The baseline is, regardless of what you do in the future, that your energy should be focused on this thing at this stage. Like my family also told me/she said, “30-year-old women do what suits their age.” That's their favorite line, meaning at this age you must complete the three tasks of getting in a relationship, getting married, and giving birth to a child before you can do anything else, at around 30 years old.

By conveying this ongoing struggle between her mother and her, Peiran called forth another cultural message (distal-already-spoken) and how such a message was interpreted by others (i.e., “in China many women...”), specifically in the specific context of her family. Peiran, who was approaching the 30-year-old line but focusing on establishing a company, was considered by her mother and other family members to not be meeting the static “baseline” of establishing a specific form of family (based on heterosexual marriage and giving birth), by which women’s life and body were controlled. Her entrepreneurship, ultimately, was rendered unsuitable for her gender identity and aging body. One intriguing detail was that despite Peiran’s mother’s firm belief in and efforts to push Peiran to fulfill the “three tasks,” she spent most of her own life being divorced; therefore, she herself did not live in or actualize this “ideal” mode she envisioned. Meanwhile, she had been running a successful company herself. However, at least in Peiran’s version of the story, the mother’s embodied experiences still could not make her see alternatives.

4.1.3 Motherhood is Incompatible with Entrepreneurship

Closely related to 4.1.2, motherhood and pregnancy concerns pervaded the women’s narratives. Although I intentionally avoided asking about specific gender roles, including the mother role, discussions or reflections of motherhood occurred in most interviews spontaneously. Nearly all participants deemed motherhood and pregnancy inevitable and essential to women, while only three of them explicitly express support for women who chose to be child-free. On occasions, a few participants even showed disapproval of women (and men) who were single and/or child-free. In addition, participants described pregnancy as a major disruption to women’s career (on a personal level, in which women’s birth-giving body became the issue), without imagining possibilities to reposition it in the grand relations of social

production (e.g., policy change). In short, motherhood and pregnancy were rendered inevitable by participants, which, in the meantime, was talked to be incompatible with entrepreneurship and, more broadly, professionalism. This sub-theme unfolds these layers.

To begin, in participants' narratives, women's body, based on gender dualism and biological determinism (i.e., not considering other possibilities of gender), was repetitively described as one that *must* go through pregnancy and giving birth (instead of seeing it as an agentic choice). For example, in her discussion of how she understood "women entrepreneur," Jiefei stated:

I think women entrepreneurs really face a lot more difficulties than [entrepreneurs who are] men. Firstly, the physical/bodily aspects of women entrepreneurs are no match for that of men, aren't they, for example, *xiang fu jiao zi* and giving birth to children. Secondly, maybe in traditional, personal consciousness [or ideology?], women are thought to be weaker than men...maybe in the entrepreneurial process, women really would taste way more bitterness than men. For one, it's the bodily aspects, [because] you will give birth, like, I gave birth to two children, and for both, I worked until I was in labor.

In this excerpt, the physical body of women took precedence in her accounts of difficulties, and, in the distal already spoken site of discourse made present by her, the pregnant body was associated with women's challenging experiences in entrepreneurship and overall taken for granted weakness. Yet, experiencing pregnancy was spoken as a matter of fact ("you will..."). It is critical to note that although many of the examples I explore in this section (and in this dissertation) show participants perpetuating specific ideas, I am by no means attributing *the existence* of ideas only to their discursive practice. In fact, by both RDT and structuration, they are constantly drawing on discourses that entail a network of agents/actors, constantly in the process of relating. In another case, Qiang also brought up pregnancy as a challenge in her response to the same question:

A woman entrepreneur needs to...take care of the family, all while taking care of her enterprise. Her social identity is, in fact, twofold, so her greatest conflict lies here. In Chinese traditions, well, *are you gonna take care of the kid? That's what was assigned to women in the first place!...Of course, it's not fair* because when God designed humans, their features were different. Men can't give birth to children while only women can. That's unequal in the first place. Then in terms of the dependency relationship in the family, when you want a child, it must be you who conceive and give birth to the child, which inevitably delays a lot of your things.

Despite being critical of the primary caretaker role assigned to women, Qiang still tended to assume the presence of a child through biological motherhood in a woman's life. Although by adding "when you want a child," the discourse of motherhood became more expansive, in that women's agency regarding pregnancy (wanting) might be acknowledged. Interestingly, she pulled on two sources of discourses both sitting in the distal-already spoken site, Chinese traditions and Creationist beliefs ("God designed humans..." although she was not religious), in this discussion of motherhood as women entrepreneurs' struggles.

The troubled relationship between women's entrepreneurship and motherhood was also complicated by participants seeing pregnancy and performing mother roles as a major disruption to and distraction to women's career, productivity, and overall intentionality. Additionally, instead of thinking about how policy-level changes could make women's pregnancy no longer or at least less of disruption, they tended to attribute problems to women who might get pregnant and their embodied changes. For example, Congrong said:

Pregnancy, I think, is a great challenge. Basically, you wouldn't be able to concentrate on work for two to three years, resulting in you losing a relatively long "golden period" [for career development?], meaning you [experienced] a disjunction. Maybe two to three years after giving birth, when you come out again, your everything, including your "psychological construction," would need to restart...Many girls could be very ambitious when she just came out to work, you know, and I've seen too many! See I have many female employees. When you (second person example) just came out to work, before you got married, or maybe when you had already been married but hadn't given birth to a kid, you were still very energized, ambitious, competitive, aspiring, and competitive. But once you got married and had a kid, I tell you, your career drive would, *clang*, collapse by 50%!

In this account, pregnancy and motherhood were set as obstacles to professional activities and career development. She also separated motherhood from psychological states that she considered critical to career development (e.g., being ambitious and competitive), which were also often associated with masculinity (Ahl, 2006). Additionally, women members became the only party responsible for this constraint. Nevertheless, Congrong might also have gone beyond the personal level to consider the social construction of motherhood, as she critiqued: “It’s because your maternal instinct—your understanding of maternal love—would limit you...you understand maternal love as simple companionship, right? The level of how you understand maternal love would thwart your career development.” By saying so, she recognized motherhood and maternal activities as changeable social construction open to reconstruction (see 5.1.3).

The way of understanding motherhood and maternal love, which Congrong critiqued, was a source of anxiety to several participants over their own motherhood. Participants and other proximal addresses (e.g., mother and sisters; schoolteacher) with whom they symbolically interacted in the interviews talked about responsibilities associated with and specific ways of performing the mother role in ways that made motherhood and entrepreneurship incompatible. On the one hand, they understood that the most important way to fulfill motherhood was by accompanying their children, *entailing physical presence*, or being around constantly, or being home performing child-rearing duties. On another, this one most important way of performing motherhood, however, was not realistic because they also ran businesses and managed many members and tasks, which required a lot of time and energy. Participants made sense of this incompatibility differently. Congrong, for example, disagreed with her mother and sisters and negated constantly being around the child as the one best way and emphasized long term, subtle guidance a career mother could provide (see 5.1.3). This sub-theme focuses on those who have

mainly experienced motherhood and entrepreneurship as impossible, mutually exclusive choices and contradictory roles, characterized by negative emotions. For example, several participants who were mothers expressed self-blame by saying things such as “I neglected the companionship to my child” (Aixiang), “I haven’t done enough as a mother” (Qiuyun), “I was seldom around and my maternal love for my son was absent” (Tianjing). Although their self-reports suggested that their children grew up to be just fine, a common theme was they felt being inadequate as mothers, drawing from the be-constantly-around expectation. For some other participants who were still mothers of minors, feeling anxious and guilty for not “accompanying” their children enough was an ongoing struggle. For example, Boya thought she only spent 20% of her energy on her teenage son, while 80% on her company, and the “conflict” between this reality and the ideal she understood “resulted in great psychological stress regarding childrearing.”

4.1.4 Women/Girls Need a Stable Job Instead of Ventures

In this theme, the tension centers around the nature of entrepreneurship as an occupation and its relationship, indeed the lack thereof, with women and femininity. Specifically, in participants’ accounts of when they communicated with others about their intention to venture into business, their conversational partners would show disapproval or at least a lack of understanding of their intention by stressing the idea that women/girls need a stable job, which would allow them to fulfill their gender roles. By doing so, these conversational partners, usually family members, perpetrated the idea that women belong to the home space and disassociated femininity from ventures, opportunities, and agency. On another layer, some participants’ framing of their own entrepreneurial process, one that was considered, for example, “accidental” or “unintentional,” might also run the risk of reducing their own intentional efforts to mere accidents and even the byproducts of male relational partners (e.g., husband), meanwhile striping

women of agency. This framing is in sharp contrast to the alternative narrative that some other participants crafted, in which they emphasized their choice, individuality, and desire for ventures (see 5.2.4).

There is an important nuance regarding the idea of a “stable job” in the present context. On one level, participants might discuss the stability in work and career as something desirable to everyone, men and women (and nonbinary folks acknowledged by two of them) alike. For example, participants from older generations (e.g., Post-50s; Post-60s) mentioned the ideas of “iron bowl/铁饭碗” and “gold bowl/金饭碗,” that were metaphors for reliable positions in state-owned enterprises, and that were considered prestigious and often enviable back in the eras of China’s planned economy and the government systems (i.e., “civil servants”). In this theme, however, a stable job was treated by people as the fit (“shi he/适合”) for women/girls, for considerations of stereotypical femininity and gender roles.

Qunxi’s experience offered a good example. Before she started venturing into China’s budding e-commerce industry in the late 2000s, she had a stable job “within the system/*ti zhi nei*” (a specific way of referencing tenured positions in state-affiliated organizations), in government-affiliated institutions. Desiring higher income and wanting to “have a try,” she quit her job and started her business, which did not please her mother.

When I just started my business, my mom did not agree, because I was very young, and then my mom strongly opposed [the move], thinking *how could you, a girl, quit a job within the system?* She couldn’t understand and thought it was beyond logic. She thought it would be too tough or something and worried and objected [my choice] a lot...the second thing was, my mom had experienced starting a business herself, and knew how brutal society can be, so she thought maybe girls-because in China, I don’t know about how things are like in other countries, [but] Chinese women [do not lead an easy life], do we? [You] gotta also take care of the family, [or else] others would say you got *no xian liang shu de* (virtues), wouldn’t they? Okay, then you also need to work well, and if not, your in-laws would look down on you [so would] your husband, wouldn’t they?

In this excerpt in which Qunxi made sense of her mother's opposition to her, a young "girl"/woman, starting a business, the entrepreneurial venture was disassociated with career stability, while associated with difficulties in fulfilling gender roles assigned to all Chinese women, characterized by balancing work and family demands (she used "balance" herself). Then, a Chinese woman choosing unstable entrepreneurship over a stable job became an unintelligible event. It is important to note that this troubled understanding that Qunxi and likely her mother both have had stemmed from what they lived through in practices.

More often in other participants' narratives, the connection between women and stable jobs was not explained or reasoned, but rather recited as a matter of brute fact. Similar to Qunxi, after Yun's graduation in the 2000s, she went far in the civil service exam (through which "civil servants" are selected) of a city, to the interview round. Her parents, having worked for a major state-owned enterprise, also wanted her to have a stable job affiliated with the state. However, Yun desired "novel stuff" and as a result gave up the stable position for starting her exploration in e-commerce, which, however, puzzled people around her:

Most [of them] disagreed. My parents disagreed for sure. They thought you had already been earning 200K annually, because I was a commercial director, [which] they thought was great and a girl needs stability and it's not good to *zheteng*,¹⁹ especially during the first few start-up years.

Here, "a girl" needing "stability" was not further explained, but a layer of complexity might still hint at the need to fulfill gender roles, as she continued: "Although they rejected [starting a business] a lot, actually they still gave me full support regarding things like [taking care of my]

¹⁹ *Zheteng* was an infamously untranslatable colloquial expression in Chinese that had been translated as "inflicting self-inflicted setbacks" when translators were trying to translate the surprising use of this humorous expression by former president Hu Jintao in a formal speech. Hu's use of this expression in his official rhetoric addressed to national and international audiences triggered a whole debate among linguists and translators (Li, 2010). In the context of this specific quote, it could mean making oneself go through unnecessary troubles.

kids, but they did object a lot in terms of the ideas.” In this account of her parents’ paradoxical rejection-support act, the tension between entrepreneurship and motherhood was surfaced again.

As from the perspective of structuration, profound, deeply entrenched rules were weakly sanctioned, requiring little discursive efforts (Giddens, 1984), the effortlessly (re)cited association between women and stable job in participants’ narratives and by their relational partners may be such a rule in the current gender order. Besides specific gender roles (e.g., caretaker), essentialized femininity also came into play in this easily maintained disassociation. For example, in her accounts of how others responded to her initial attempt in entrepreneurship at the expense of a stable job, Jiefei stated:

When I started my business, in the specific environment of that era (the 80s), folks (her family and neighbors in a village) couldn’t understand. [They said,] “Hmm, why this woman-this girl chose to try hard over a great environment (referencing a stable position in a government department)?”...maybe everybody’s understanding varies depending on their origin, subconscious, and will. Maybe I got the personality of a boy...depending on individual personalities, if you are the gentle and frail kind, you may choose more stable [jobs]. Maybe I was born to be the striving and competitive type. So, firstly, folks could not understand starting a business because of the environment, in that age [when] China [just started the reform and opening-up plans]. Everybody was more conservative, and [starting a business] required courage.

Jiefei’s account of how she negotiated “folks” (proximal-already) lack of understanding of her choice was eventful. She mainly drew on trait-based (personality) assumptions about entrepreneurship, where traits considered fit for entrepreneurship were associated with male gendering (“boy”). This male gendering was not at all unique to her account and was shared among many participants. However, her interpretation remained expansive, opening to different explanations, as “maybe” was used throughout. Even her understanding of personality traits shifted more towards individual differences instead of essential differences between gender categories. Additionally, attributing her entrepreneurial intention to ecology (changing economy in China) further opened the interpretation.

Although Jiefei spoke from a specific era, the first two examples have already shown that a disconnection between (especially young) women and the changeable process of entrepreneurship that draws on conventional gender discourses remained very much present. Here are a few more even “fresher” examples, based on experiences of women born in the late 1980s to early 1990s, in which women’s ventures in entrepreneurship were rendered unintelligible by different parties in relation to specific gendered activities. Peiran’s wealthy family would not hesitate to give her a lot of money to buy “purses and clothes (stereotypical feminine objects; she also associated shopping with femininity elsewhere) and even houses and cars” but could not understand or accept her requests for “the least amount of money” as venture capital. Instead of supporting her startup experience, they only hoped she would “inherit the family enterprise.” Eventually, she got the money from them “as loans.” Young women participants from rural areas were challenged by views that still emphasized *xiang fu jiao zi*. Pinghui shared, “My parents live in the rural area. [They] basically hoped their daughter *xiang fu jiao zi*, finding someone to marry...a woman would never [achieve] more than men.” In Zihan’s case, even when her family fully supported her business, some family friends said things like, “Why would a girl do these things...why not getting a normal job” or “a woman should not be out there dillydallying. Marrying someone is enough” or “pretty as your daughter is, why even bothering trying so hard?” Lastly, Xia, who went back to her village from her urban life to start a business in the agriculture industry was asked by family and neighbors why a “young girl in a flowery age” like her went back to do the “the dirtiest and most tiring jobs” in a village.

4.1.5. Women in the Face of Immovable Traditions

The last theme reveals participants’ concerns, worries, and anxieties about Chinese women’s (including women who are entrepreneurs) thwarted participation in social production

(e.g., in the workforce). Their worries oriented to those more distal structures and institutionalized practices that were seemingly immovable due to their scale and depth, before which individuals were framed as being powerless. In interviews, participants attributed a future where change would be difficult if not impossible to three themes of concerns, including the thousand years of long-standing patriarchal traditions (history), the alcohol culture that dominated business socializing, and the loosened population control policy (i.e., from “only child” to “second child”).

A not-so-optimistic view that many participants shared on changes in the current challenging situation facing women entrepreneurs and other women professionals (and new possibilities) was that they were unlikely, or at least would still have a long way to go. Sharing this view, participants emphasized the long-lasting patriarchal traditions manifested in specific relational dynamics and practices of China.

For example, after her reflection on people’s negative attitudes toward women entrepreneurs and transgender folks, both as bodies disrupting traditions, Dinchun said:

I tell you, how immense is the power of traditional Chinese cultures, and [the power] is *gen shen di gu* (deeply rooted)! Yes, these four characters, *GEN SHEN DI GU*! Haven’t you noticed that even young people in China-how old are you this year [asking me]? You will find there’s a threshold, meaning that after [you’ve turned] 27, 28, to 30, you suddenly realize that the many thoughts of yours will get closer and closer to your mom’s! Her things and ideas that you used to not understand or want to challenge will assimilate you eventually...that’s how I felt. I couldn’t understand her (her mother), and then [you] become one of the mass/majorities.

In this excerpt, that the traditions being deeply ingrained, a perception triggered by the idiom, “*gen shen di gu*” (deeply rooted), and the force of cultural assimilation (cross-generational) were the source of her pessimistic interpretation at this specific rhetorical moment (she would turn to reframe it later). Right before this excerpt, she also spent a few minutes discussing how both women entrepreneurs, who play “reversed gender roles,” and transgender women would never be

fully accepted by “men, even including women in a patriarchal society.” This never full acceptance characterized by gender binary was part of which that would remain unchangeable. In this account, her words activated all four sites of utterances. On the distal-already spoken site, she addressed patriarchy and its subjects. In her discussion of being assimilated into the majorities, distal and proximal and already and not-yet intertwined in that she was symbolically thinking from my perspective about the future assimilation while simultaneously drawing on her own experience of being assimilated through interaction with her mother.

To some other participants, the lack of changeability of traditions and its constraints on women entrepreneurs were more conditional. For example, Pinghui considered the differences in regional cultures and the varying degrees of progression in China. As previously mentioned, Pinghui was a young, divorced woman, and the local discourse regarding this status made her interactions with male stakeholders intricate. She imagined that she might achieve more if she was a man who would not have to be so careful in socializing in male-dominated places. I asked if she noticed gradual changes in the environment, to which she responded:

It’s not gonna happen for now because the idea that men are strong while women are weak is so deeply internalized by us. Maybe Shenzhen is relatively ok, in terms of their trends of thought. This includes my friends, girl friends, colleagues, like those with who I’m in contact, in Hong Kong and Macau. They don’t have the concept that a man and a woman [working together or remain in touch?] means possible affairs or something. But in [an inland province], the ideas are not yet that progressive, meaning that feudalistic ideas remain still strong. So, it’s necessary to be more careful whether being in touch with a [government] leader or a friend, especially for a divorcee like me...you won’t have these thoughts in America, but [you are from an inland province, too] so you should still know about some of these things (biased assumptions about women). These are real things, not made up. How do I say this? It’s a lot different for women to do business than men.

In this account, she started with a universal claim in which specific gender biases against divorced businesswomen were too “deeply internalized” to change. However, she soon considered differences in regional cultures between more progressive and conservative areas,

based on her interactions with different specific people from these regions. This account also gave a glimpse at the situated nature of performing entrepreneurship as a woman in terms of China's dynamic regional cultures. Her provincial/regional identity came into play in the clash between her gender and entrepreneurial identities.

Additionally, the tension activated by competing family and work roles women entrepreneurs must negotiate also surfaced in a pessimistic envisioning of the future. For example, Shanglan shared how she understood a women's success in relation to family-work balance. She aligned with the idea that the real success for a woman necessarily involved a "happy family" (likely heterosexually married with children), regardless of how successful her career was, and that "if your family [life] is not successful, then I don't think she's successful enough." Therefore, she brought up the necessity for women to "balance these *guanxi*/relationships...be wise...be more understanding, give more, and tolerate more." Nevertheless, when I asked if she thought the balance demands were fair, she responded: "*It's not fair!* [but you] *can't do anything about it!* Our whole Chinese society is like this, in the customs. You can't do anything about it. At least I can't change, even if I want to." In her conflicted alignment with the balance expectation, changes to unfair traditions became impossible.

Another major lingering source of concern most participants (29/34) discussed and were, to different extents, disgusted by was the seemingly unchangeable Chinese alcohol culture that epitomized masculine socializing and organizing. As previously explained, business dinners or other meals (*fan ju*/饭局) are perhaps the essential networking practice in China through which *guanxi* is formed and stabilized, tasks are accomplished, favors are exchanged, and more (Lam, 2009, Yau et al., 2000; see 4.1.1). In fact, the current project also relied on this practice, albeit

not heavily. To participants, these occasions were where they felt being alienated a lot due to the “Chinese alcohol culture” inseparable from this practice, by which drinking (excessively) under social pressure was the norm, wherein the messy issues of sexualization and objectification of women bodies would also emerge.

At least three participants explicitly reported that they had experienced sexual harassment when drinking was involved at business meals. For example, when accounting women entrepreneurs’ challenges, Hai shared:

...Another disadvantage is that sometimes you got taken advantage of [by men]. It happens. After some drinks, [he’d] touch you, or hug you...I’ve experienced these, right here in [this city] ... he had to hug you or pinch you. He said, “Ah, how pretty you are,” after some drinks. On this occasion, you could only push him away (performing a push in a gentle, nonconfrontational manner) and say, “Gee, you-” this and that (expressing avoidance and rejection in a shy and unclear way). Some decent guys sitting aside would say, “Hey, [I’m] calling your wife!”...I really hate this and am disgusted.

In this performative account, her body was placed at a “disadvantage,” whereby women’s bodies became a target for sexual harassment. The power dynamics as well as the need to maintain the face of a man in a position of power (while clearly disregarding a woman’s face), even made stopping this behavior difficult (only in indirect ways). Although she, like other participants, hated and felt disgusted, she still had to attend this activity critical for business as part of the *guanxi* building process. Such a potential danger associated with the sexualization of women was understood by many participants. Some even went so far as to describe business meals involving drinking and other similar occasions (e.g., going to karaoke) as “inappropriate occasions for women,” despite the importance of these socializing events in business (see Bedford, 2015).

Health concerns created another “awkwardness” related to the alcohol culture. Many participants expressed their dislike for drinking alcohol and stated, through generalized assumptions, that women could not drink as much as men and that alcohol consumption was

particularly harmful to women's bodies. For example, based on her own experience, Cuiwei responded to the question about when she would feel the saliency of her gender in business:

Drinking! Yes, DRINKING!... I think women are disadvantaged when you have to [drink]... it's very awkward because I'm not saying I can't drink, but alcohol really is harmful to your body...my husband also hates it when I drink. So, I feel so awkward whenever I raise the glass/cup...when people drink, they may get more intimate maybe under the influence of alcohol, so it's the most [awkward] when drinking... nowadays, if you insist not to drink, they won't necessarily push it, but it's awkward if you don't. So, you can only drink.

Here, the drinking practice concerned Cuiwei for both health considerations and complications related to sexuality and interpersonal boundaries. However, while being disadvantaged as a woman in this practice, she had to participate in this activity following the tacit rules for conducting business in China. Overall, the normalized alcohol culture was one that troubled many participants when mentioned. Ultimately, standing long as part of the traditions in business socializing, as one participant put, "the alcohol culture in China has too long a history," the alcohol culture also became a stubborn obstacle to changes to Chinese women entrepreneurs' disadvantages. Although strict regulations had been established in 2017 by the Xi, Jinping government, banning drinking at business meals involving officials and employees of organizations or systems affiliated with the state (e.g., government, military), a few participants stated that it helped very little in the business sector (e.g., Cuiwei said, "Nah, still drink!").

Lastly, the recent amendment to China's population control policy²⁰, from "One-child Policy" to "Open Two-child Policy," emerged as a concerning social change regarding the future of Chinese women's participation in production in a few individual interviews and the focus group. This national policy change disrupted these participants' meaning making of their

²⁰ In 2015, the fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee announced the "Open Two-Child Policy," meaning that any legally married couples could give birth to two children. The policy would be further opened in later years.

entrepreneurship on at least two levels, including (1) feeling uncertain about the reliability of their current women members and whether they would be able to find future “good” female employees, and (2) worrying about the overall Chinese women’s development. It is worth mentioning that this topic also emerged at a dinner party where I met five prospective participants (four recruited, three participated) as well as a few other people (e.g., the chair of an association). Some of these people even went so far as to consider it destructive to China’s gender equality movement.

Mengting (Post-60s), the owner of a pharmaceutical company, said, “I used to be hopeful” in response to my probe whether she thought things (regarding gender equality) were getting better as more women have participated in social production. She proceeded to explain that she had been hopeful as she had seen increasingly more young women outperforming young men in higher education and that most of their ideal candidates at job fairs ended up being “girls.” There was a tendency, as she observed, that “boys are devolving” while “girls are becoming more excellent.” However, the second child policy dwindled this hope of hers:

I felt like subjectively speaking, women in society were getting better and better regarding their personal development and pursuit...but now I am confused; since the “second child” has been opened, the objective social condition again started limiting women’s development. Like, if you give birth to one child, there are four elders who help in childrearing because it’s new to everybody so they fight for helping, isn’t it?...in fact, we thought to give women employees a bit more assistance and more understanding.

She then described in detail several practices they have for supporting women employees who were new mothers, including baby care rooms in the company, apartments provided to new mothers and their caretakers (e.g., mother, nanny), no business trip arrangement, additional leaves, and overall a two-year period of leniency. She also deemed having one child beneficial because it would make a person more tolerant, loving, and patient:

However, after the second child was opened, [people] would go for [it], and now even a third child. Once the second child was born, I could feel obviously that, a woman, she no longer had much energy on work...two children, even the family elders [wouldn't be able to handle].

She further listed more complications that came with the second child and said,

So, I basically would give up on a woman if she had a second child, speaking from the perspective of management...I didn't have the heart, nor could I ask her to put 70-80% of her energy into work in the first place, so she wouldn't move up.

In this case, the second child policy not only caught the management at her company by surprise despite the said support provided to mothers but also made her lose hope about the progress she had seen. Having more young women employees around likely also made the concern more immediate.

In another case, Tianjing (Post-70s), bemoaned having already lost a woman assistant in the corporate, whom she deemed a lost asset:

To be realistic, ever since the "second child," enterprises like us have been facing the situation that you can't even find a good women female employee anymore, let alone women entrepreneurs. Do you know that I cultivated/trained/mentored a woman assistant in our corporate, which took me a lot...to take over my part, and she had become savvy at multiple regions' sales. [However] she ended up [having] a second child, after which she couldn't even work anymore, and the asset/talent was lost like the company cultivated [her] for nothing...she couldn't work anymore after the second child, because nobody could help her taking care of kids. Her mother-in-law was too old, and she didn't trust hiring nannies, and maybe her husband wasn't willing to [help].

She further shared concerns over other factors making up such a "blunt reality," including the normalized working overtime that many Chinese men and women face; the unchangeable Chinese traditions of keeping giving birth until a son; and a group of women already laid off from work since the second-child policy. These concerns sounded very familiar as they were also brought up at the dinner table and by other participants. While in both Mengting's and Tianjing's accounts, women's pregnancy and constrained bodies were centered as the source of problems, in the focus group, discussion briefly turned to consider systemic changes by which pregnancy

itself was no longer the problem. For example, Yuehui, the founder of a private health care facility, stated:

I feel like now maybe one thing everybody's struggling about is the opening of the second child policy, which is a real issue, and then the "third child" will soon open, too. Maybe there will be confusion regarding choosing certain careers/occupations or [personnel training] in companies or units because one more child requires a large amount of time [when the child] is between zero to three years old. How are we gonna handle this? [We] are not saying we don't support the opening up, but instead, how can we improve/complete the functions of some supporting services related to the policy...such as maybe every institution and enterprise can have some type of daycare facilities.

It is worth noting that she negated the idea that gender discrimination was still a pervasive issue but still brought up the second child policy as a "real issue." In a transformative way, she moved beyond seeing women's pregnancy and motherhood as problems to consider how systems could accommodate to better integrate mothers. Women's pregnancy and birth-giving bodies, including their own bodies, have already been an ongoing negotiation as participants struggle to make meaning of their women entrepreneur identities, as shown in previous and forthcoming themes. The state's control and regulation over women's bodies added more complexities regarding the constraint-enabler dialectic that went beyond the scope of the present project (e.g., the only-child policy had also enabled women to be unbound from the tradition of giving birth to many children). However, one thing that became clear in participants' talk about this policy change was that the state was also a powerful voice on the distal site, with which participants must negotiate on the local site of sensemaking.

4.2 Discourse of Integration (DOI): Women Entrepreneurs as Agents of Change and Possibilities

As mentioned earlier, this study also identified five other discourses/sub-themes that provide alternatives to those presented in 4.1, in which participants have discursively and practically moved away from a misplacement of themselves in the work-family contexts. That is, women (entrepreneurs) are no longer unfit bodies for entrepreneurship, and (women) entrepreneurs are no longer threats to family balance or harmony. Rather, participants have found ways to integrate their gender and work identities, whereby they became agents of change to the masculine, male-dominant entrepreneurial worlds, like one Hanchun put thoughtfully:

Why do we separate “woman entrepreneur” from “entrepreneur?” It’s because everybody used to think entrepreneurs were all men...it’s a male-dominated world, so everybody thought successful entrepreneurs were all men. However, the positions/locations of men and women are slowly changing as society develops, and many women are developing better and better in the workplace, and can break through the previous “bottleneck.” [In the past] women couldn’t achieve some social status and could only stay at home, assisting the husband and educating the child (*xiang fu jiao zi*/相夫教子). It’s like that in China and foreign countries...it’s a kind of bias and “glass ceiling” for women in the workplace. Slowly, the glass ceiling got broken through...and women can participate [more] in the co-construction of social and family responsibilities, so many women became prominent [in the workplace in leading enterprises], and slowly women entrepreneurs were created... and the term “woman entrepreneur” was accepted by others.

I still attend to nuanced, culturally specific ideas and messages regarding “Chinese woman” and “entrepreneur,” participants’ self-expressions concerning these identities, other dimensions and fragments of their identities situationally matter, and the situation/context itself. This section is organized by five sub-themes in which “woman entrepreneur” become a meaningfully integrated identity and the practitioners of this identity change agents: (1) Women entrepreneurs and femininity enrich entrepreneurship; (2) women entrepreneurs create new family harmony; (3) motherhood and entrepreneurship complement each other; (4) women/girls seek entrepreneurial adventures; (5) women in the wake of progressive changes.

4.2.1 Women Entrepreneurs and Femininity Enrich Entrepreneurship

In 4.1.1, the presence of women as a group and femininity associated with women bodies in entrepreneurial contexts (in China) is made to be an unsettling one, eliciting various negative responses in different actors (including themselves). In the current theme, participants' narratives rendered possible (and present) a competing reality in which women's bodily presence and femininity (taking a trait approach) became sources of enrichment to the current entrepreneurial practices (e.g., socializing, managing). This possibility for which they advocated also stems from their process of interacting with varied relational partners who were stakeholders to their businesses and careers (e.g., business partners, family members).

Similar to 4.1.1, what separates discourses in this theme from the rest in this section is that they again address general ideas and assumptions making up women as well as the essential feminine traits/features/qualities and trait-based behaviors associated with women bodies. Participants focused on foregrounding "women's unique advantages" characterized by stereotypical women's/feminine traits (e.g., soft, caring, loving) and associating desirable traits with women (e.g., resilience). This framing, in general, reflects an essentialist approach to understanding gender identities. Such an emphasis on dichotomized essential feminine and masculine traits, however, ironically reinforced gender dualism, which is attributable to the contradictory practices producing the entrapment of women members in organizational contexts (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). Nonetheless, these discourses served to talk back, generating counter-narratives, to those that delegitimize women entrepreneurs and feminine traits associated with them in a range of ways (see Chapter 5).

While participants might reproduce a kind of misalignment between women and entrepreneurship by disassociating the embodiment of stereotypical femininity from business and

professionalism in general (see 4.1.1), many of the women, and sometimes the very same person, also attempted to (re)align and elevate femininity within business and managerial contexts. They considered things women could do better than men and ways in which feminine traits and behaviors could enable more effective management. In my interviews, I identified a range of such traits or trait-based behaviors *discursively made* feminine and fit for entrepreneurship, such as detail orientation, loyalty/reliability, resilience, and better communication. Providing a full list of such traits is not the goal of the current question, which would also take too much space (and time). Therefore, I provide instead an example that demonstrates this specific discursive practice as part of how participants turned women and femininity as a force of enrichment.

One prominent theme was that women entrepreneurs, who were usually among the top management, communicate better and coordinate workplace relationships more effectively. For example, to Aixiang, the first thing that a chief executive must do was to “coordinate various *guanxi*,” and women entrepreneurs were more advantageous regarding this task because:

First, a woman is born with her sensitive aspects, and so she does better than men regarding relational communication. I’m speaking of the majority [of women], not absolute. So [women] can utilize this advantage in, for example, interacting and communicating with employees. [Next], usually, women are stronger than men in seeing through who people really are, which again puts her at an advantage regarding managing an enterprise. You can use your own advantage to do better in team-building...for example, on some occasions, I’ve seen that when women meet, they will show each other enthusiasm and warmth [though] small talks or something, expressing their feelings. Normally when men meet, they still communicate, but their expression wouldn’t be as warm...for example, at some conference panels, when [taking part in] some heated debates, women would think there should be a peaceful solution [and] it’s unnecessary to be so heated, but men would be very confrontational, must arguing to figure out who’s right and wrong...that’s a social phenomenon I’ve seen.

In this observation, Aixing clearly took a trait-oriented approach informed by the essential femininity of women and masculinity of men to reconsider women’s fit in management. She deemed women to be more sensitive, instinctual, warm, and peaceful than men *by nature* (i.e., by

inborn traits), which were considered good qualities for coordinating *guanxi*. These four specific traits and the overall idea that women were better at communicating and building relationships due to their softness were common in participants' accounts. Even in the focus group, a discussion about women's management style compared to men's style led to an attendee concluding:

[Women's softness enables the creation] of a relatively harmonious way of organizing, not characterized by commands... women are willing to communicate. Maybe to employees, men [talk] in a commanding tone. 'You do this today!'...but maybe we women are more willing to communicate, to empathize, and to understand, highlighting a kind of spirit of team collaboration.

There were several other essential traits associated with the nature of women prominent across interviews, which were considered strengths of women in performing entrepreneurship and leadership. For example, Menghui discussed how her strong instinct as well as her sincerity, which she considered as what made her gender salient, could help her read what others wanted to hear by thinking from their perspectives. Qiang and Hai both considered how women were more reliable and loyal and thus were better collaborators and organizational members.

While participants were empowered by these accounts of fitness and strength associated with essential feminine traits of women (i.e., reinforcing gender dualism), their discursive practices have also created several rhetorical dead ends, from which they might have to return to the unfit discourses established in the previous section. For example, omitted from Aixiang's excerpt presented earlier was her assumptions that (all) women were bad at mathematic thinking, and therefore were not suitable for certain roles. In another case, Tianjing started from accounting essential traits of women constituting their advantages (e.g., being detail-oriented and sensitive); nevertheless, this approach led her to consider how men had "broader horizons" and

therefore are better at innovative tasks, which further led to the positioning of women in the context of family life:

Regarding building larger frames and bigger pictures...[men] have more advantages than women because women's energy is limited after all. Maybe men still can spend more energy on careers because women still need to take care of the family to some extent and children.

Drawing on binary assumptions, she talked herself into a dead end, and an account of women's strength turned into what belonged in the previous section. There are several dead ends like this. For example, Mingzhu Dong emerged as one of the few archetypes for women entrepreneurs through participants' talk (see later). Known for her toughness as a leader, Dong became a target for the biased (and sexist) judgments from some participants who relied on the essential feminine softness in their accounts of women's advantage in management or leadership. Despite Dong's monumental success, some participants deemed her not ideal for being not soft and feminine enough.

However, I identified one *possible* solution from a few participants' narratives that might enable transforming binary discourses into one where a real sense of femininity as enrichment for entrepreneurship could arise. This rhetorical solution was enabled by the nonbinary relationship between the metaphysical concepts of *yin* and *yang*, which were commonly associated with femininity and masculinity, based on Taoist thoughts. Feminist philosopher, Rosenlee (2006), has long ago argued that the ideation of *yin* and *yang*, symbolizing femininity and masculinity, as *complementary and mutually entailing* forces creates possibilities for reexamining gender issues, not in terms of femininity-masculinity dichotomization and interpreting Chinese women's experiences in ways not falling into Western-centrism. A few idioms drawing on this *yin-yang* relationship emerged in participants accounts, including “*yin yang ping heng*/阴阳平衡” (*yin-yang* balance), “*gang rou bing ji*/刚柔并济” (coupling/wielding

softness and toughness), and “以柔克刚” (*yi rou ke gang*/penetrate toughness with softness). It is important to note that these phrases were invoked on the margin of perpetuating or moving beyond gender dualism and essentialism. For example, the few examples above have shown how softness was invoked only as an essential feminine trait *of* women, or as an alternative approach only women use to intervene in masculine organizing, like Ruoyun said, “...*but* compared to men, women are softer, and therefore if the role of women can be used well, she enables better team leadership in a *yi rou ke gang* fashion.” Similarly, although *yin* and *yang* might be recognized as equally fundamental forces sustaining society (Congrong), they were still attached to women and men in binary ways (e.g., *yin*=women=femininity). The idea of *yin-yang* balance was even talked about in the context of women do it all to maintain work-family balance (e.g., Jingjing). In two participants’ narratives, however, the essential connection tying *yin* and *yang* and femininity and masculinity to female and male bodies became possibly breakable. That is, masculinity and femininity were no longer fixed sets of essential traits but rather changeable embodiment. This framing helped Mengting *arrive at* a view, though started from essentialism, that entrepreneurs, men and women alike, need to be “*ci xiong tong ti*/雌雄同体” (be male and female; having femininity and masculinity in one body). This example is expounded upon in later sections. The point here is that through different ways participants talked about how femininity and women could enrich the male-dominated world of business and entrepreneurship, to legitimate the presence of women in business.

Importantly, women’s (bodily) presence itself discursively enriched entrepreneurship in at least two main ways. At the distal level, the existence of well-known successful Chinese women entrepreneurs paved the way for the emergence of archetypes alternative to those based on the image of successful (White) men (Gill, 2013). Although the names of a few famous

American or Chinese male entrepreneurs (e.g., Jack Ma, Jianlin Wang, Bill Gates, Donald Trump, Elon Mask) occurred in participants' discussions of entrepreneurship, Mingzhu Dong, a Chinese woman, occurred naturally in many participants accounts. In general, participants spoke of her in favorable terms as a “radiating” example and a good role model for Chinese women entrepreneurs. For example, in the focus group, Ruoyun stated:

The ones [women entrepreneurs] everybody is familiar with, like Mingzhu Dong for sure—but because she’s pretty far away, [my understanding of her] mostly came from news media reports [However] there are a lot of outstanding women who are entrepreneurs around me because I joined the [local] women entrepreneur association...On their bodies, I saw a kind of resilience and the beauty [of] perseverance, and ingenuity. I think Mingzhu Dong should also have these. The fact that Gree (Dong’s enterprise) can be so powerful and famous now must be attributable to this kind of ingenuity and perseverance.

Specifically, all participants in the group praised Mingzhu Dong for being a successful woman entrepreneur (although the discourse that Dong could be a bit softer also occurred). Other famous Chinese women entrepreneurs being mentioned by participants (not just focus group) included Zhou Qunfei. The mere presence of these role models could speak on the distal site in this context, providing discursive resources for other women entrepreneurs for sensemaking. Interestingly, like how Ruoyun reflected on the distal nature of these powerful women, Lili, in the focus group, directed her admiring discussion to another established woman entrepreneur with whom she had interacted (the proximal site).

Then the enrichment moved to the more proximal, interpersonal level. Several participants told stories about how they were helped, inspired, and/or encouraged by women entrepreneurs and women government leaders they knew. For example, Tianjing considered the owner, a woman, of the department store where she worked two decades ago her “the first teacher/mentor” in entrepreneurship. The owner saw her potential and promoted her to a managerial position, while Tianjing observed her managerial styles and practices. Five

participants (Boya, Hai, Shanglan, Ruoyun, and Menghui) also told stories in which they received support from or collaborated pleasantly with women leaders (stakeholders) in political systems, whom they considered as mentors or like Menghui said, “good teachers and helpful friends” (*liang shi yi you*/良师益友). Moreover, being women in positions of power themselves, some participants shared specific ways how they intentionally helped their own women employees. For example, Hanchun would mentor her women members by helping them create periodical “IDP”s (individual development plans); Mengting provided apartments into which women employees who were pregnant or new mothers and their helpers or caretakers (e.g., mother, nanny) could move; Yun’s company also had a flexible shift policy for pregnant members. Additionally, second-generation entrepreneurs who were daughters of first-generation women entrepreneurs also considered their mothers as role models.

In sum, the bodily presence of women entrepreneurs on both the distal and proximal sites of meanings, and their specific embodied acts, formed an empowering picture for fellow women entrepreneurs, creating a communicative flow that enriches and reshapes this male-dominated, masculine space.

4.2.2 Women Entrepreneurs Create New Family Harmony

A number of participants reconsidered the relationship between women’s work and family lives, in their discussion of ideas of work-life/family balance and/or family harmony, as one that no longer featured a kind of rupture between these two spaces. Such a reconsideration competed with the discourses in which women’s entrepreneurial and overall professional activities were treated as being destructive to “traditional” *nei-wai* balance or family harmony (see 4.1.3).

In their reconsideration, harmony and balance were treated as being relative, flexible, evolving, and co-created practices formative of new family harmony and *nei-wai* relations, rather than a fixed interpretation of the Chinese family traditions where balance and harmony were attributed to women staying inside to fulfill roles and responsibilities captured by idioms such as “*xiang fu jiao zi*/相夫教子” (to assist the husband and to educate the child) and acting like obedient wives and daughters. This reimagined balance made present by a few participants recalibrated what could make women valuable, indeed how women could actualize their self-worth in the context of family harmony and balance. Women’s independence, financial contribution, and contribution to meaningful conversations enabled by having a career took precedence in this view, especially one that was as potential as entrepreneurship (although they struggled to incorporate women who were “stay-at-home moms” or “full-time wives” in this reimagination). Additionally, family harmony in their talk often extended beyond a nuclear family context to consider extended family members (e.g., in-laws, multiple generations, siblings, and cousins) and even kinship networks embedded in a local community (involving the idea of family honor).

Hanchun, for example, claimed a “new housewife” identity in her discussion of family responsibilities. She started by identifying herself as a “housewife” at home and stating that “don’t use men for women [and vice-versa]” and that “as the wife...I feel happy to cook for my husband.” However, she immediately said that “house chores ought to be shared by two people (spouse)” and then said in a laughing tone:

Oh no no no no no, it’s impossible [that I do everything]! It’s impossible that I come home to be the “amah” after I worked outside, absolutely not...I am the new kind [of housewife], rather than the pure kind that does all sorts of things at home...I’m not that diligent, nor am I that *xian hui* (virtuous, a gendered adjective). But we (family members) negotiate with each other and respect each other...indeed, family [and] marriage need management [so do] enterprises and everything else, nothing would grow into what you

want it to be [without management] ...just like an enterprise, which is huge, isn't it, and then us managers need innovation, management skills, and organizing capabilities, don't we?

In her nuclear family, house chores were split between everyone, including the child, based on the idea of mutual respect and understanding as well as what one can be within his/her/their abilities (*li suo neng ji*/力所能及). In her paradoxical account, a new impure identity of housewife emerged, one that actively negotiated for herself and was no longer tied to domestic chores. This identity construction was also seemingly enabled by her organizational and occupational identities as a top manager of an enterprise, which provided her with the management metaphor for her family life.

Other participants (e.g., Jingjing, Menghui, Yun) also mentioned how management skills they learned from and practiced through work helped them “manage” and “coordinate” family tasks and relationships, usually involving three generations of members (child-parent-grand-parent). For example, Yun shared how she learned to use the idea of “reaching consensus through” “calm” and “clear communication.” Her idea was based on her understanding of ideal management to “coordinate” and engage in “managing” the roles that family members play in completing the “trivial” tasks of the family life, which might be a source of conflict for “some families.” Through this coordination, depending on “clear” but not too “direct” language (as in a direct command), her family, including her parents, husband, and children, could form a “tacit agreement.” In Yun’s case, the influence of management perspectives, even just in terms of the vocabularies she used, on her family life was explicit. Although emphasizing women managing the family life perpetuates gendered assumptions such as women are the ones managing kinship ties (Leonardo, 1987) and even “*nv zhu nei*” itself, the examples still showed discourse in which

women's family and work identities can be meaningfully integrated and that the managerial roles women entrepreneurs take can be enablers of good family relationships.

Yun's focus on women's participation in family communication enabled by having a career was resonated in many participants' narratives. For example, speaking of spousal relationship and *nei-wai* dynamics, Congrong stated:

I just think that career moms, in fact, contribute more to the family, no matter economically or spiritually...and [having a "career mom"] is beneficial to the family harmony, precisely because both parties (spouse) understand the hardship at work. A lot of housewives may not understand why men have to be out there running around every day or whatever. She just thinks, oh, are you really that busy? I'm exhausted taking care of the kid every day. *The two of them can't even talk in the same world*, you know, with one stuck at home while the other outside, not even in the same world. If the two people can both be outside and also share housekeeping, there are more scenes that let them have a shared language and more mutual understandings, which is indeed a more harmonious existence.

In a constructionist sense, Congrong understood dual careers as enablers for the co-construction of a reality characterized by integrated *nei* and *wai* shared by "career moms" and their spouses. She not only emphasized shared housekeeping activities (not women doing it all) but also co-created family discourses, through which family harmony could arise. In this sense, harmony no longer rested on women either only *xiang fu jiao zi* or doing it all. Similar to this reinterpretation of harmony is Jingjing's idea of a "dynamic balance" instead of a "static" one.

In our discussion of the idea of family-work balance, I asked her whether the expectation that women entrepreneurs need to maintain balance, a point she made, was itself not fair and hard to reach (some participants such as Qiang and Shanglan agreed strongly). She responded by saying, "The balance is forever a dynamic/moving one, rather than being static, isn't it?" This reframing chilled my eagerness to critique the balance demands, and double binds quite a bit, which made me realize that the balance in many participants' understanding might indeed be one characterized by flexibility.

In Jingjing's specific case, her treatment of a moving balance also stemmed from her practice at work. She continued:

It depends on your choice...meaning you think about it (your multiple tasks?) in moving terms, categorizing them (tasks?) into important and unimportant or urgent and unurgent, and then you rank them by degrees of priority, and then process. This is [how we do] as people with methodologies (in terms of management?) ... I leave routine, repetitive tasks to other, [while] creative, intellectual work, larger things, that requires my presence to myself...regarding getting along with friends, children, and family, I use my skills and methods to maintain communication with, for example, my parents. I intentionally plan [these things] and use my resources... when there's something to discuss, you don't necessarily need to be physically present, but your responsibilities must be present...for example, I don't necessarily accompany my kids, but I definitely help in dealing with bigger things concerning them (e.g., education).

Through practicing entrepreneurship, she built a framework that enabled her enactment of agency to sort multiple tasks, including maintaining family relationships. Her understanding of childrearing also moved beyond the being-constantly-around mode. She shared a concrete example for this rather abstract "method" elsewhere in her narratives. Although she would not usually be constantly around her kids, she switched her focus from work to her son during the one year he transitioned from elementary school to high school by leaving "nonessential" work to other members or collaborators. Her "moving balance" view made me reexamine the balance discourses and specific experiences many participants shared that I deemed problematic. That is, even in narratives where participants (e.g., Aixiang) discursively aligned with the do-it-all balance approach and *xiang fu jiao zi*, when it comes to practice, some of them were maintaining a moving, non-static balance, through negotiating with family members and using resources, without naming it as such, thereby possibly reproducing work-family balance and identities associated with this context (e.g., work and family identities) through situated activities. In this sense, the discrepancy between their words and actions (a paradox) reveals a potential transformation in-process (Putnam et al., 2016). Conversely, in some other participants'

accounts, even though they endorsed a recalibrated balance²¹ and criticized women doing it all (e.g., Bing), actually maintaining it might involve more gingerly performed daily activities that could turn into double binds. In short, it was a complex picture; nevertheless, in this theme, participants themselves discursively *made present* the possibilities in which women entrepreneurs could have harmonious, balanced family lives, countering the view in the previous section.

Furthermore, participants discussed how women entrepreneurs could contribute to and create family harmony beyond the boundary of the nuclear family to consider harmony among extended family ties (this kinship network could be vast in a Chinese context) and the idea of family glory in the context of a local community. For example, more than three decades ago, Weimin sought financial support from her extended family members, such as uncles and cousins, for venture capital when she needed to purchase the full ownership of a startup company that she co-created with a state-owned enterprise. Now having come a long way from her early struggles and running an established international firm, she still gave bonuses to her extended family and has indeed become the revered family matriarch in their increasingly larger kinship network (involving multiple families and generations). In Boya's case, she employed several immediate and extended family members to work for her company, providing them with employment security.

Further expanding the boundary of the family were the stories in which participants became heroic figures of their local communities. At least five participants (Qiuyun, Jiefei, Tianjing, Bijun, Cuiwei) coming from small, enclosed, and often impoverished rural areas shared

²¹ For example, based on these following practices: Spouse's (heteronormative) mutual support for career development and self-actualization; divided household chores and shared responsibilities; concerted child-rearing efforts; an active, high-level of family communication.

the experience that fit the classic individual rags to riches narrative, but with a communal twist involving their connections to their hometown community.

Cuiwei conveys an especially fascinating case that involved a family of successful women who changed the local discourse about “daughters.” Although belonging to a younger generation (Post-80s), she and her two sisters were born into a village in an undeveloped area, where people still believed “*zhong nan qing nv*/重男轻女” (men are superior to women). The reason why they had three sisters in the first place was that their parents were trying to have a son²², and because they violated the only-child policy, Cuiwei as a child, mostly lived with her grandparents instead. Dissatisfied with the status quo, the three sisters all worked hard to achieve greatness through entrepreneurship (according to Cuiwei, the sisters were now all owners of established companies in capital cities), which also reflected the classic blessings emerging through adversities view that informed resilience studies in China (Yu & Zhang, 2005):

We were not satisfied with the status quo, not giving in to our bodies of daughters (*nv er shen*, a specific way of framing), so we want to be rid of that situation, so we thought, although we were daughters, we still need to struggle, to do better than boys through our own efforts...that’s our “original intention.” To speak in more secular terms, we wanted to not starve and dress well, and, to speak more grandly, it’s for the honor of the family. We had no boy, but I must still make my papa and mama [proud].

The three sisters did achieve financial success and soon elevated the quality of life of their family. “We were the first family ever that had a solar water heater mounted,” which had been a symbol of affluence.

So, there’s a saying circulated among those fellow villagers of ours. It goes, ‘Giving birth to daughters [brings in] solar energy; giving birth to sons brings in bolar wallaby’ ... so our folks now don’t think daughters are not good [and] they feel proud of me.

²² By the past only child policy, without complications such as genetic diseases, rural households may have a second child if the first is a girl, but a third one is not allowed even if the second one is still a daughter.

In this case, Cuiwei and her sisters not only elevated her family's financial and social status but also changed the local discourse about daughters through *enactment*, a move to be discussed in a later theme. That the local community feeling "proud of" a certain successful figure by communal attachment was another noteworthy detail about the identities of these Chinese women entrepreneurs. Other participants born in small, remote areas shared similar experiences. For example, Jiefei would now be invited to speak together with another well-known figure at their hometown's annual gathering. Qiuyun, whenever she visited her hometown, would be welcomed by village leaders and villagers. By association, their entrepreneurial identity was no longer just meaningful to them and their more immediate family members, but also their neighbors and community.

4.2.3 Motherhood and Entrepreneurship Complement Each Other

In 4.1.2, the inevitable motherhood and women's birth-giving body became a major source of concern for participants. They deemed pregnancy a major disruption to women's careers (including themselves and their women employees) and lived with guilt and anxiety for not conforming to motherhood assumptions. Several participants, however, also demonstrated how motherhood identification and entrepreneurial activities might indeed complement each other in ways, although motherhood and pregnancy were still taken to be inevitable to womanhood.

Specifically, motherhood identification (e.g., highlighting her mother identity; claiming to be the mom in her company) was no longer a hindrance to work, business, and overall entrepreneurial activities in the accounts in this theme. Rather, it might be a driver having sparked her entrepreneurial intention, a metaphor for her effective management and leadership at work, and perhaps more intriguingly a discursive resource for her organizational identification.

Conversely, heavy work and managerial duties associated with running businesses were no longer burdens preventing her from being a good mother for her child(ren). Rather, being a woman entrepreneur enabled her to be a good role model and provided her with innovative ways to cultivate her offspring (a long-term oriented good mother). In short, motherhood and entrepreneurship are no longer incompatible but instead lending meanings and practices to each other.

To begin with, aligning with the literature on “mumpreneurship” (e.g., Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Leung, 2011), motherhood was cited by some participants as a major driver to their entrepreneurial process. For example, Tianjing, was driven by the desire to “leave that poor place to create a life in the big city” and stated that, “I must give my child(ren) a better life...including better education, so I must make great efforts.” Cuiwei was also driven by her motherhood, albeit for very different reasons. In a context when the only-child policy was still effective, parents who worked for state/government-affiliated institutions and enterprises would be fired from their positions should they violate the policy. Cuiwei admitted that part of the reason why she left a state-owned unit was that “my first child was a daughter, but I still had the kind of traditional ideas (of wanting a son?) and wanted a second child, so I left the state-run unit...and slowly established my own private company. Hai, as the mother of a toddler, also attributed her dedication in her business, which belongs in the early childhood education industry, to her “deep anxiety” triggered by two infamous incidences in China that threatened Children’s safety (“fake/faulty vaccine” and “*Hong Huang Lan* Kindergarten”)²³ and her related worries about the underdeveloped (to her standard) resources for early childhood education in her home city (after returned from the overseas). Without considering other complexities in these

²³ For a quick view, readers can check <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/23/asia/faulty-vaccine-china-intl/index.html> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-42105443>

accounts (e.g., Classism, elitism), the focus here was that participants discursively built a causal relationship between their identification as mothers and their entrepreneurial intention, thereby countering the discourse that motherhood was incompatible with entrepreneurship.

Participants also reconsidered what effective ways were for performing motherhood in relation to their career identities. The dominant discourse established previously was that a (good) mother must accompany or be constantly around her child(ren), which created a gap between their ideals and what they could practice, inducing anxiety in some cases. Participants, however, also mobilized their interpretive agency to reorder the meanings surrounding motherhood in this context, drawing on discursive resources such as professionalism and personal development.

I found a perfect example of how participants reframed motherhood perspectives, quite in the spirit of RDT, in young mother Congrong's narratives. In her family, a mother accompanying or not accompanying children (being constantly around way) had been an ongoing conflict between Congrong and her mother and sisters, and occasionally a debate between Congrong and her women friends who were "housewives." The following excerpt was part of her response to the question of how did her family talk about her work, in which she reflected on being misunderstood by her mother regarding her way of practicing motherhood as a career woman.

I often work [all week], but then my mom and my younger sisters—they also have kids—they have a large amount of time to accompany their kids. However, I don't have the time, or when I finally got some, I'd take them to my office...they'd take their kids to parks or whatever. They think their values are right while mine aren't [and my practice] may not be good for the kids. However, I think my values [are correct] and I have unique ideas...maybe it is very important to accompany children, playing with them, but what's more [important] is that you need to act as a role model, letting them know that you are also constantly moving forward and that you are [one of those] parents who have expectations for themselves. A lot of parents are not doing great themselves, but they expect their kids to excel. I say, "*How's that even possible?*" The kid would think, why don't you work harder? Why are you asking me to work hard? *Right?* How can you ask [for too much from she/him/them] when you are not doing great? And a lot of the times,

kids are acute because humans are primates, after all, so they are gonna think, my dad and mom are doing great, [so] I need to be like them. They watch and learn in a subconscious way. It shouldn't be that I accompany [the kid] every day when they [for example] study for math... What's the state of a lot of little girls' parents? I send my kid there to learn to play the piano, and then I sit there playing with my cellphone, or then send [the kid] to a tutorial school, and then I hang around the nearby streets. I think, yeah, you are accompanying your children, but if you asked me to do the same, I'd think that's such a waste of time, *such a waste of time!*

This account was eventful as Congrong brought up multiple discourses of motherhood (and good work) linked to past and future utterances while symbolically taking various roles. From the perspective of her mother and sisters, she demonstrated the tension between two ways of understanding her motherhood practice based on different “values.” On the one hand, her mother and sisters, who might see accompanying child as the right way, questioned her practice. On the other hand, Congrong countered their views by emphasizing mother playing as the role model in personal and professional development for children, which was indeed enabled by her entrepreneurship as a mother who runs an established business. She further strengthened the role model discourse by imagining the internal voice of children who did not have parents who could serve as good role models. Through such a process, Congrong replaced the discourse in which the present, “immediate” companionship of the mother took precedence with one that emphasized “long-term” cultivation (while not fully reject the accompanying view), as she further envisioned in the interview:

But I think I'm accomplishing a long-term thing by doing so. Maybe when the kid is 20 years old, he's still too little to realize these things, but when he's 20 something and comes out to face society, he may understand you. By then, he understands you more profoundly. So, what they do gets instant result: immediate company results in immediate effects, but mine is long-term.

Many participants, even those who deemed accompanying children essential and thus felt guilty for not being able to do so, resonated with this role model view that highlighted “embodied/performed” (sometimes unintentional) “positive influence” (“以身作则的正面影

响”) during primary socialization. On occasion, this view had been enabled and validated by other people involved in the primary socialization, such as schoolteachers and grandparents, if not the children themselves. For example, Jingjing learned from her son’s headteacher that he decided to study harder because his “mom, a girl, can work so hard.” Although her young son’s utterance revealed a strong bias against women/girls, in this specific context, it paradoxically evidenced the productivity of Jingjing’s motherhood style. Shanglan’s adult son once also told her he felt grateful to have her as a role model and for her cultivation. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, participants whose mothers were also practicing entrepreneurship also regarded their mothers as role models. It is worth noting that some participants (including Congrong) reconciled the tension by changing how companionship could be understood and enacted. For example, instead of only seeing being physically present as companionship, many participants foregrounded expressing care and love and communicating with their children as offering companionship.

Another way to extend companionship was to indeed involve their children in their professional lives and specific activities, creating ways of performing mothership and child cultivation characterized by “innovation,” which happened to be a buzzword in entrepreneurial discourses (associated with entrepreneurship by 21 participants). For example, both Cuiwei and Tianjing (and Qiang) shared a similar point that having a career was indeed crucial for contemporary Chinese mothers in terms of not only better serving as the role model for children but also keeping up with novel, updated perspectives and social practices (e.g., new social media such as Tiktok) emerging with the new generations, which would allow them to find “common topics” or “resonance” with their children instead of being caught in the “generation gap.”

Enabled by their resources, some participants shared creative ways of including their children and incorporating child cultivation in their work.

For example, although Qiuyun would not talk about work with her younger daughter at home, worrying that she was already a “troubling” teenager²⁴, she would invite her to attend large-scale business events:

I provide them (daughters) with guidance using the way how I think...the other day I needed to give a speech [for] hundreds of commercial agents, and I really wanted my [younger] daughter to also attend because it's best to enrich the experience of a 14-year-old. Of course, It's an annual experience, but if you just asked her, “Can you go listen to mommy's speech,” that's not right, was it?...I'd say [instead], “Can you go help me by being an audience member and giving me some suggestions?”...After the speech, I'd ask her to give feedback, which is a type of guidance...after the speech, I asked her, “[nickname], [what kind of suggestion you have for me?]”...I asked her, “Alas, I felt my PPT was terrible. What do you think?” She said, “Well, I felt pretty motivated and [the PPT] was necessary.”

Importantly, this example effectively weakened her own statement: “Alas, I always felt I spent too little time with my children.” With the platform made accessible by her entrepreneurship, she could provide her children with new and privileged socialization experiences through which they might learn valuable skills (e.g., critical thinking, public speaking). In another case, when her son, who was interested in entrepreneurship, was still in high school, Shanglan would provide him with the opportunities to go onto business trips on her behalf, through which he could learn skills and (perhaps more importantly) building *guanxi* connections. By the time of our interview, she was indeed retiring from the company for her adult son to take over. Shanglan further shared that:

Yeah, [my son] is very supportive and understands me a lot. He said he understood a mother like me because I was always out for business trips since [he's] little, due to the nature of my work...he particularly understands. He said, “Mom, if you back then stayed at home to be a ‘贤妻良母/good wife and good mother,’ spending time everyday tutoring

²⁴ I did not understand her logic reasoning here. She was attributing her choice of not talking about work at home to her daughter already being a “troubling” or “*ma fan*” teenager who was in her rebellious phase. Maybe she meant talking about the complexity of work at home would irritate a rebellious teenager?

me, likely I wouldn't be as good as today." Maybe [we] wouldn't have enough to pay for his tuition [for college in] the US, would we... he said, "Nor would there be such a great foundation for today."

In this conversation that Shanglan had with her adult son, her being out there while not being present enough for her son in his childhood, despite sat in contrast with the conventional "good wife and good mother" discourse, turned (transformed) into a better alternative where opportunities (for intellectual, social, and financial capitals) arose. In these utterances, entrepreneurship was no longer contradicting motherhood but rather was beneficial to performing motherhood.

Yet, there was one more layer about the relationship between entrepreneurship and motherhood revealed through participants' narratives. That is, some participants' motherhood identification (seeing and talking about themselves as a mother) could help maintain their connection with their enterprises. While motherhood and pregnancy were previously considered a hindrance to entrepreneurship and career development, they could also be sources of meaning in participants' identification with their organizational and occupational identities.

For starters, echoing 4.2.3, some participants associated the mother role (that women would inevitably take) with essential feminine strengths/strong points in management. For instance, Bing said, "Others say women are petty and frail, so we women running enterprises must be magnanimous, utilizing our advantages as mothers [to be] generous, inclusive/forgiving, and loving and wielding the strengths of women." More fascinatingly, however, was that some participants used motherhood and women's birth-giving body as metaphors (and also analogy) for *giving* meanings to their emotional connections to their creations and members. Consider, for example, the following statement by Jiefei, in which she was reflecting on a turning point in her

entrepreneurial process at which she turned from “short, flat, fast” (短平快) investment to be part of the “real economy” (roughly, involving production and the flow of products and service):

I wanted to do a “real,” something inheritable/can be passed down. As a woman entrepreneur, I had this analogy: It’s like a woman like me can give birth to a child, who shall always be mine, and then my child can have a child, so [it’s] an inheritable, sustainable estate/enterprise. So, I chose to do what I currently do [be in my current industry] ... Nowadays everybody wants to make some ‘short, flat, fast’ investments. Maybe I wasn’t like that. I thought I wanted to create an enterprise, like women giving birth to a child. From conceiving, delivering, to raising the child, it needs a process, rather than me just adopting a child. Maybe after two years of cultivation, you could help me make money, but still, it’s still without a root (I think she shifted back to talking about a company), so I wanted to “do a real” (be part of the real sector?).

Invoking biological motherhood, marked by ideas of inheritance, she drew on the biological process of women giving birth and raising a child, as well as the deep connection (“root”) cultivated through it, to interpret the long process of establishing an enterprise, rather than making more short-term investments, thereby to make meanings of her transition. Interestingly, this transition into the agricultural industry by starting a company that participated in the development, production, and trade of products, what she deemed “real,” was where she saw herself starting to be an entrepreneur.

Similarly, Hanchun also used the analogy of seeing a child grow to give meaning to her long history with her company and the profound connection she felt:

I’ve been part of the company for ten years and a profound connection/attachment to it. Having witnessed its step-by-step growth since the first day I became the chief director, from billions to twenty plus billions, is like having seen the growth of a child by days. You definitely have feelings for it.

Lastly, the meaningful merge of motherhood and entrepreneurial identity was most salient in the following statement by Weimin:

I’m now in my 70s but still in the frontline...it feels like [my enterprise] has become my second son, you know?...I raised it up like an infant by my own hands, including our employees [who have been following the company] for 15 years. From starting up to now, it’s been 26 years. How many 26 years you have in your life?...a lot of [our

employees] paid me respect, saying, “[name] is the mother of us [company name] and is the goddess of [company name]!”

Here, an intimate mother-son relationship was clarified analogically between her and her enterprise. Further, motherhood (and goddesshood) also became an effective metaphor for her leadership and relationships with employees. Indeed, Jiefei would also draw on the image of the mother to tell her younger employees that her occasional “wordy” communication regarding their work showed that she cared, just like only mothers would get wordy with their children.

4.2.4 Women Seek Entrepreneurial Ventures

Previously in 4.1.4, I presented discourses in which only stable jobs were considered fit for women/girls, and women were disassociated with ventures and explorations. For one, in dominant discourse, there is a tendency to only speak of the identities and worth of women (entrepreneurs) and their work/labor in the context of familial relationships. For another, there were existing assumptions about the weakness and fragility of women bodies and femininity, rendering women’s risk-taking activities unintelligible (e.g., why would a woman choose ventures). However, counter-narratives also arose from participants’ accounts.

Specifically, about half of participants expressed their lack of interests in stable jobs while claiming desires for ventures, adventures, and challenges, as they told stories about how they became rebellious daughters who disobeyed or disregarded their parents’ wishes or even demands for keeping stable jobs (or even just getting married) to venture in entrepreneurship. On another layer, participants also told stories about how they enacted intentionality and agency, cultivated through work, to create and maintain the entrepreneurial life that they desired, despite challenges from both close relationships and China’s complex environment for business (e.g., government as the most powerful stakeholder).

As previously shown, whereas people around some participants, parents, and neighbors, for example, suggested an assumptive connection between women and stable jobs or stability and thereby only deemed women having a stable job sensible, participants themselves provided counter-narratives challenge this connection. Disliking and thus leaving previous stable jobs was a shared experience for many participants. For example, PT shared:

I worked at a bank after graduated (from college). Back then, my earliest motive was that I didn't want to lead through a life where I could see the end from the beginning, like seeing myself at my 40-50 years old when I was only 20-something. Maybe I was still young[er], driven, and reckless, and maybe had it been now, I wouldn't necessarily have had the courage to start a business.

PT's parents, of course, showed strong disapproval of her decision to leave her job at a bank. In China, employment in the banking system was a classic stable and lucrative job desired by many. However, the perceived predictability of a stable job motivated her to choose a different life where she saw changes. Two other participants had very similar experiences. Congrong also gave up two stable jobs, one at a prestigious university in Beijing and another in a bank, to join her father instead to run a company. She also said, "I didn't like this kind of stable jobs, where I can see my future clearly from the present" while liking the "challenges" and "freshness" that came with running a company in an "unpredictable market" despite precarity. Pinghui also puzzled and concerned her parents with rural origins a lot when she left a bank where her ex-husband also worked and the structured 9:00 am to 5:00 pm routines for seeking entrepreneurial opportunities and higher income. Overall, participants left different types of stable jobs that were enviable to many for changes, opportunities, adventures, novelty, higher income, and other varied reasons. Nevertheless, the commonality in their stories lay in their highlighted individuality, discursively separated from the relationality (in relation to the family; in relation to

men) that perhaps has characterized the dominant discourses of womanhood in China a little too much.

A highlighted individuality through entrepreneurial venture became further salient in their narratives where they arrived at the idea of self-worth. For example, Menghui had a “gold bowl” (see 4.1.4) working for a “rich” state-owned institution, where she observed and felt:

It really is boring to lead a *bu si bu huo*/不死不活 (neither dead nor alive; lifeless) life because all our leaders/superiors were all like, alas, a piece of newspaper and a cup of tea from 9 am to 5 pm (symbolizing a boring lifestyle), which I felt was not what I wanted.

Despite the stable, high salary, she slowly parted from the company and persuaded her husband to do the same (to the chagrin of her father-in-law) while beginning to explore different business opportunities. Reflecting on her entrepreneurial motives, Menghui shared:

In fact, the earliest motive couldn't be separated from human nature, which was wanting a better life for myself. But my husband and I were already having a good life, but we [had] an opportunity. In the beginning, you wouldn't have greater goals (那么大的情怀), just wanting to have a better life, would you? Then based on my thoughts that I had greater abilities to do better things...but maybe I wouldn't be able to realize my own self-worth in the unit (where she had the stable job), so I was willing to take the risk/have this adventure.

Despite also accounting grandiose goals, such as promoting Chinese cultures “on the international stage,” elsewhere in her narratives, she traced her choice of leaving a stable job while taking risks in entrepreneurship back to her selfhood and individual desires, contrasting the discourses in which women's meaningfulness was *only* placed in relation to others. This emphasis on women's individuality in and through entrepreneurship echoed through all interviews to different extents. Such an individuality stressed venturing in entrepreneurship *for themselves* despite risks and ideas such as self-worth and what oneself wants. Even participants who shared more conservative views on gender roles, in which *xiang fu jiao zi* and women's obedience might be taken for granted, would highlight personal abilities and choices. For

example, Aixiang, who emphasized “*nan ren shi tian nv ren shi di* 男人是天女人是地” (men are the sky; women are the earth), “treating the man as the center of the family,” “being a little woman at home,” and overall performing the obedient woman identity, would reorient by acknowledging women who had great abilities, were “commissioned by the heaven/sky to do things,” and were “born to play the strong role” could take dominant positions like being a successful entrepreneur and leader. Indeed, when she just started her business after leaving her faculty position at a “key middle school” (schools acknowledged and supported by the education department for good performance), neither her parents nor her husband supported her decision. However

I just didn’t listen to them and did my own things. The last words I gave them was “I’ll pay the debt I owed myself, and I for worse or for better don’t need you [to pay the debt].” Then I just did my thing and slowly proved myself and [in the process their attitude] changed.

It is worth noting that some participants, especially those who lived through the eras of heightened class struggles (e.g., the Great Cultural Revolution), also chose entrepreneurial ventures in private sectors over stability offered in state-owned enterprises and institutions to leave organizational control and specific systemic practices associated with China’s politics that they did not appreciate (e.g., involving corruption and sexism).

4.2.5 Women in the Wake of Progressive Changes

Lastly, in contrast to 4.1.5, this section ends in participants’ hopeful, optimistic envisioning of the future for Chinese women entrepreneurs and women in general regarding their participation in social production. Participants commonly noted a growing presence of women entrepreneurs in recent years. Like Ping said, “These few years, I’ve found that more women entrepreneurs have emerged to the surface.” Participants acknowledged that women’s participation in social production and specifically the rise of many women entrepreneurs could

be attributable to larger productive social changes, such as better opportunities for education and China's reform and opening up followed by economic growths. For example, Qiang, in a very structural sense,²⁵ considered that "society is more open" and that "in today's society, as more women entrepreneurs have shown up, they are slowly, SLOWLY, changing the social structure...yeah the change is happening, slowly changing the social structure." She further attributed this slow but progressive change to better education newer generations of Chinese women could receive:

And the level of education that women get is getting higher...social status is indeed related to the level of your knowledge. [So], women's social status is getting increasingly better. In your generation, you've seen a lot of your female classmates and schoolmates were all very independent and you for sure treat them as equals, but in our generation, there have been more requirements.

In her framing, women entrepreneurs showing up to create a presence for themselves had already been intervening in the structural process, but the showing up was simultaneously made possible by changing practices of education. In addition, education becoming accessible to women was the main enabler to multiple different generations of participants' entrepreneurship. That experience varied according to social locations, which Qiang briefly mentioned in terms of generational differences, was worth further noting. Whereas most participants were at least encouraged by immediate family members to pursue good educations and academic success, while some had access to premium resources (e.g., study at top universities; study abroad), one participant, Bijun (who had attempted suicide to resist family control) gave a glimpse at a different reality. She was forced to drop out of school and help in farm work (e.g., feeding pigs) instead as soon as she reached seventh grade so that her brothers could continue going to school. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind intersectionality while reading these women's

²⁵ Structure is produced and reproduced through recursive social practices.

experiences; that is, resources enabling some women's social mobility are not always available to others.

More participants foregrounded women's enactment of agency in the hopeful change process. For example, Peiran stated:

Many things in the world are headed for the good and the new. No matter you change them or not, they are orienting to some development. A person has limited energy, but I do my part regardless. I think women will be increasingly more emancipated. They are a productive force, after all. The productive force you demonstrate is going to earn you respect.

From quite a Marxist point of view, she considered optimistically the constant development of society and women's emancipation associated with their participation in social production. She also acknowledged the agency women could enact through "do my part" to "demonstrate productivity" in the change process.

Congrong, also specifically mentioned two leading women entrepreneurs in China to envision how women entrepreneurs have already been in the process of normalizing their own presence, thereby reproducing realities.

Because the whole ecology is like that. If you...are outstanding, you can lead a large group of women to contribute [to society] in an equal way. Like Qunfei Zhou and Mingzhu Dong (two well-known women entrepreneurs), who can be considered being among the group of people leading the social trends...folks will see [their] breakthrough and no longer see [women participating in entrepreneurship] as some unique thing, thinking it's just fine and normal.[What's] used to be exceptions may become normals.

Here, the performativity of successful women entrepreneurs was in the process of changing entrepreneurial discourse.

Additionally, whereas, as previously shown, the long history of China and Chinese traditions were a source of hopelessness due to their perceived immovability, participants also drew on them to make sense of the slow change while envisioning the possibility for changes to

arrive. Recall that Dinchun thought changes were impossible due to the deeply rooted cultural traditions in China's long history. However, she also stated:

One person's power is limited, but folks congregate, and piece by piece, I think the present is much better than the past. To be frank, [changes] take time. [Some] say that contemporary China has this and that kinds of social issues. No matter! I say, you see them (likely referring to the United States) capitalism has been more than 200 years after all. What we have [has not] yet been 40 years in full account, has it, from 1978, but all these things (e.g., market economy) had not really started until around 1990... all these issues need accumulation, transformation, change, and *time*. Don't be too anxious...of course [society] will change, but changes are slower in China for sure...because it has accumulated too much...will a 50-year-old not change at all? No, s/he changes more slowly, but a 5-year-old changes drastically in the blink of an eye! Why America changes so fast? How many years of history have they merely got, right? About the changes of things in China, especially regarding culture, your lengthy/cumbersome history determines the speed of your change. Don't get too worked up. It takes time.

The simultaneous youthfulness and ancientness of China made it possible for her to interpret changes in different ways (see before how changes were considered impossible by her due to the long history). This simultaneity, coupled with observable changes accumulated through collective courses of action ("the present is much better"), opened up a generally optimistic outlook that she has for China's future progression and a semantic field where changeability exists, despite the sluggishness. That change in traditions took time was a common understanding on which participants relied (e.g., to make sense of the present yet to arrive equality). One unique framing by Boya, however, gave new meanings to traditions by considering women being independent as part of the Chinese traditions: "I've always been a pretty independent woman, possessing some traditional ideas of China, like independence, meaning I must have my career." In saying so, she rendered the once constraining traditions themselves anew.

Lastly, Hai highlighted how changes could be activated by the collective voices of women entrepreneurs and other women in positions of power.

I think women entrepreneurs can come together to voice for women entrepreneurs, and including women government officials, such as [a specific women leader she knew]. I think they...can come together to let out voices and to help women, can't they, because...first you need to fight and seek for [what you want] ... I would encourage everyone to take some targeted actions for women, like funding for women entrepreneurs, and then the government should pay more attention to what women entrepreneurs have done good and their difficulties. Finally, I think the global [arena]can give women [more opportunities] to voice, to give women a [larger] stage.

In this statement, she addressed both proximal and distal actors on the future-oriented (not-yet-spoken) site of discourse in the context of envisioning what voices can do regarding gender equality and equity. In so doing, she acknowledged the changes and progressions made possible by women's active voices along with actions ("fight" and "seek"), through which women's enactment of agency was foregrounded. Meanwhile, she also situated the possibilities of change in concerted social efforts and the context of a linked world. Overall, changes were possible and can be activated by voices.

Chapter 5: The Interplay of Discourses

In Chapter 4, I identified two overarching discourses, including the (1) discourse of misalignment, women entrepreneurs as misplaced bodies (DOM), and (2) discourse of integration, women entrepreneurs as agents of change and possibilities (DOI). These two themes illuminated the dialectics, the opposites but interdependent poles constantly in a push-pull (Putnam et al., 2016) that animated the relational lives of Chinese women entrepreneurs within different contexts.

RQ2 asks in what ways do competing discourses engage in interplay and how do women entrepreneurs move/act through the interplay of discourses. The first part of the question, again, follows established RDT studies to identify the particular ways (i.e., lexical markers) in discourses through which some types (e.g., negating, hybrid) of the relationship between discourses or meaning systems are established. The second part, however, further considers the issue of agency, and more specifically, the co-agency of discourses and communicators. That is, in their structuration, discourses and their relations are created, maintained, and transformed through people talking but also make people talk in certain ways. In answering this second question, I also further explore the materialization of discourse. Table 4 summarizes the findings that answer RQ2.

Table 4. RQ2 Findings Overview (Parts 1 to 6)

Part 1				
RQ2: In what ways do competing discourses engage in interplay, and how do women entrepreneurs move/act through the interplay of discourses.				
RDT Dimensions/Features	<p>Patterns of interplay (discourse)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Patterns of move/act (speaker)</i> 			
Nonantagonistic-Antagonistic Struggle	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Entertaining</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conforming</i> • <i>Disassociating</i> </td> <td style="width: 33%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Countering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Disassociating</i> • <i>Obsoleting</i> </td> <td style="width: 33%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Negating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rebelling</i> • <i>Questioning</i> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Entertaining</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conforming</i> • <i>Disassociating</i> 	<p>Countering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Disassociating</i> • <i>Obsoleting</i> 	<p>Negating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rebelling</i> • <i>Questioning</i>
<p>Entertaining</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conforming</i> • <i>Disassociating</i> 	<p>Countering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Disassociating</i> • <i>Obsoleting</i> 	<p>Negating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rebelling</i> • <i>Questioning</i> 		
Direct-Indirect Struggle	<p>Ambiguity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shifting</i> • <i>Quantifying</i> 			
Serious-Playful Struggle	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Seriousness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The senior</i> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Playfulness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The witty</i> • <i>The “xia”</i> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Seriousness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The senior</i> 	<p>Playfulness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The witty</i> • <i>The “xia”</i> 	
<p>Seriousness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The senior</i> 	<p>Playfulness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The witty</i> • <i>The “xia”</i> 			
Polemic-Transformative Struggle	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Balance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Compromising</i> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <p>Hybrid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Complementing</i> • <i>Queering</i> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Balance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Compromising</i> 	<p>Hybrid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Complementing</i> • <i>Queering</i> 	
<p>Balance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Compromising</i> 	<p>Hybrid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Complementing</i> • <i>Queering</i> 			
Voiced-Enacted Struggle*	<p>Enactment</p> <p>Proposing and providing evidence for a new dimension/property</p>			

Table 4 (Continued)

Part 2 Nonantagonistic-Antagonistic Struggle “Antagonistic-nonantagonistic struggle” concerns whether and to what extent multiple semantic positions (i.e., worldviews, meanings systems, discourses, not speakers themselves) in dialogue clash with each other.		
Positions of competing discourses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Situated discursive movement/action of participants</i> 	Description	Examples
Entertaining <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conforming</i> • <i>Disassociating</i> 	Entertaining: Acknowledging one discursive position is but one among other possibilities, where “multiple discourses can be identified within” a speaker’s utterances” (Baxter, 2011, p. 132). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conforming</i>: I know that points A, B (and C and D) are all valid; however, I have to do certain things according to A because it’s been like that for a long time. • <i>Disassociating</i>: Points A and B are both valid, but I would not choose A. 	<p><i>Conforming</i>: All these years, I’ve never let my husband [know] I was exhausted, sometimes, but I think I...did not treat it (providing service) as the reason for my exhaustion, or I wouldn’t feel bothered by this. For example, after [we] go home, I could just start to play my phone, but I still have so many things, like, for example, the documents are not yet read; the nanny didn’t fold the laundry right, so I’m willing to rearrange them; when we are on a business trip, for example, he can just take a shower, put on pajamas, and start watching TV, but I still need to hang the clothes and prepare what he’s gonna wear the next day, don’t I, and then I still need to make him some tea...these are all that I’m willing to do, but many may choose to not do these.</p> <p><i>Disassociating</i>: Yeah yeah yeah, [emancipation] takes time, and it’s beyond what I can influence as one person. Well, some women like to rear children at home, which is their choice of lifestyle and has nothing wrong with it...But I think the risk might be a bit high. It’s like you are betting on your husband, but what if he went out for someone else, and what if he and you didn’t have a good relationship, you know, you’d have to restart all your bets again. [I]’d rather depend on myself, which feels more reliable, psychologically...</p>

Table 4 (Continued)

<p>Countering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Disassociating</i> • <i>Obsoleting</i> 	<p>Countering: The “limited worthiness” of a competing position is acknowledged before being disclaimed (Suter et al., 2015, p. 474).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Disassociating</i>: Some people believe in point A and I may see the reason behind it, but I disagree/believe in point B and I won’t do it. • <i>Obsoleting</i>: Back to 100 years ago, point A may be valid, but it’s no longer 100 years ago! 	<p><i>Disassociating</i>: First of all, in this process, women should be more independent. But some women...completely don’t want these (things related to independence), and she’d rather submit herself to men to get living expenses. She’s willing to do those things. Many are like this...I found that many of my male schoolmates at [a famous business school in China]...thought women are easy and would follow me for money. But see, when I sit in front of [him], and I’m richer than [him], he won’t say such things...I think women should be more <i>zhiqiang</i> (a close translation is self-reliant, but not fully grasps the meaning) to let others value you...When others look down on you or treat you unfairly, maybe the first [reason] is that you don’t [strive to be] <i>zhiqiang</i>.</p> <p><i>Obsoleting</i>: This is a time of “public innovation and mass entrepreneurship” (大众创新, 万众创业). Women must have their own careers. Have you seen this thing [circulated] online? It’s about a celebrity...like “when getting (or still) married, he said, ‘I will feed (provide for) you when you stop working,’ and then after the marriage, when divorcing, [he] said, “Hey, even you are fed by me (expressing ownership).” It’s something like that, been viral online. So, it’s also a [reminder] for women. Now women all started entrepreneurship, [or] all have jobs, and some of the traditional ideas in the past will be gone.</p>
<p>Negating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rebelling</i> • <i>Questioning</i> 	<p>Negating: Completely rejecting the value and validity of opposing discourse.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rebelling</i>: Point A tells me to obey certain rules, which I don’t agree with at all! Then I must do point B. • <i>Questioning</i>: Why do things have to be like what point A determines? I am questioning its fundamental value. 	<p><i>Rebelling</i>: Fear only that you get discouraged as soon as others [criticize] you, [saying things like,] “Alright, I quit!” Then another day, you get your confidence shaken when someone else is saying things about you. You’d accomplish nothing this way!...I’d say, “You, the more you say I can’t [be successful], the more I—the pressure you give me, in fact, is also motivation—the more I do!” I said [to my audience] that’s how I overcame [difficulties]. Others said this and that about me. <i>I’m going to deliberately show you!</i></p> <p><i>Questioning</i>: <i>Why must all these family duties be assigned to women? Is it enough that men only care about earning money, while not about the family? Is it okay? [if a man didn’t take part in taking family responsibilities]...why would I bother marrying him? I could just adopt a child from overseas, couldn’t I?</i></p>

Table 4 (Continued)

Part 3 Direct-Indirect Struggle The dimension of “direct-indirect struggle” concerns “ambiguity of meaning” (Baxter, 2011, p. 134) and how it functions in the interpenetration of discourses.		
Positions of competing discourses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Discursive movement/action of participants</i> 	Description	Examples
Ambiguity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shifting</i> • <i>Quantifying</i> 	Ambiguity (the three functions): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Creates a “semantic wiggle room” for involved parties to avoid direct interplay between competing discourses (Baxter, 2011, p. 134). 2. Produces or further marginalizes alternative discourses by not responding to issues directly. 3. “[T]emper[s] the authoritativeness of a dominant discourse” (p. 136) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shifting (function 1)</i>: A and B are opposing points. I agree with point A, but then I agree with point B while disagreeing with A; however, I agree with A again. I agree with B and A and B. • <i>Quantifying (function 3)</i>: A and B are opposing points. People fit the description in A, maybe mostly not absolutely. 	<p><i>Shifting</i>: Nowadays, there are “househusbands,” but not a lot. He’s always the target of controversies and side-eyes...So, usually, we women, after going home, may still need to take kids [to school] or [help them] study, and then do laundry or some other house chores, but a man, maybe he can actually sit there reading newspapers and sipping tea and call it a day...well yeah, as a matter of fact, they could also take part in [chores]...Well yeah! Like you have a few clothes hanging there for a few weeks, don’t you, your husband absolutely won’t take the initiative to take them back!...I’ve never seen any man put clothes in categories and put them back in the closets on his initiative...only women do this thing...I don’t think this needs to be changed. It’s natural...I think [homemaking] is what women are supposed to do...because women do take charge at home and prioritize home...</p> <p><i>Quantifying</i>: I think female entrepreneurs and male entrepreneurs are indeed different. Women entrepreneurs, in fact, have their advantage in that, firstly, speaking of the “woman nature,” they have their tender side, and so they can do better than men regarding relational communication, well, mostly not speaking in absolute terms</p>

Table 4 (Continued)

<p style="text-align: center;">Part 4 Serious-Playful Struggle</p> <p>According to Baxter (2011), the “serious-playful struggle” considers the “tone of an utterance” and how different tones could challenge a competing discourse in unique ways. In the current RDT framework, based on Bakhtin’s Burlesque caricatures, there are three “devices” or “stances,” namely, rogue, fool, and clown, that communicators can take to enact playful struggles. I identified three new devices that fit the current context.</p>		
Positions of competing discourses	Description	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Discursive devices enabling participants’ action</i> 		
<p>Role of Seriousness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The senior</i> 	<p>Seriousness: Competing discourses are challenged in serious tones/manners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The senior:</i> The most common device that participants enacted on occasions where they felt the sensitivity, awkwardness, or even threat associated with their gender identity (here, being a woman) was the senior, who is professional, experienced, <i>older</i>, and overall <i>serious</i> about business. Treat me seriously because I am a professional! 	<p><i>The senior:</i> It’s like the chair of the board must be an old man or whatever...I was always treated like a secretary to the chair. So, after that...when I was starting my business, I even cut off my long hair and deliberately dressed up in simple, old-fashioned styles...to make myself appear experienced, giving others the sense that <i>hey, I am</i> the chair.</p>

Table 4 (Continued)

<p>Role of Playfulness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The witty</i> • <i>The “xia”</i> 	<p>Playfulness: Playfully (in terms of tones) ridicule, mock, tease, and, overall, indirectly challenge the competing discourse. To create absurdity and potentially make it difficult for the opposing position to fight back.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The witty</i>: the witty stance might be enacted by participants in intricate situations when they could not directly “say no” to men in power in situations where faces must be maintained for businesses to be done. In the context of sexual harassment, the witty knew how to move her body and present herself in playful manners to momentarily evade the physical grasp symbolizing the normalized sexual harassment and the domination of women. A witty stance might also be taken by mobilizing other sources of empowerment or conjuring forth (make presence) other bodies of power to level up oneself in the discursive interplay. • <i>The “xia”</i>: Xia/侠 is a heroic, romantic character archetype in Chinese literary works. A <i>xia</i> is bold and forthright and unrestrained but following creeds, who enforces justice and helps others (and themselves) in unique ways. The stance of the <i>xia</i> can be a playful one featuring an untamable nature and no longer restrained (but not unconstrained) enactment, potentially evoking unexpectedness in a taken-for-granted situation sanctioned by dominant discourses, thereby thrusting in the norms to create a local exigency where changes may be possible. 	<p><i>The witty</i>: I said, ‘Oh hey, look! A new dish arrived! Try something else!’ (performing reaching out to something in the air while swaying her body to one side) Like you’d push him away and protect yourself. And others [sitting around] would [help], too...I hated it so much and I [felt] disgust[ed] by it, but I also knew he wouldn’t dare to [really do anything]. And, you just cunningly make him (a male leader) not feel awkward.</p> <p><i>The “xia”</i>:...And he was [indicating] he only wanted me to drink, getting me wasted, so he’d be the winner, wouldn’t he? Then I wouldn’t allow it. I was wearing a tank top under my blazer because it was hot that day, and I got this tattoo. [So I] pulled off my blazer, leaving only the tank top on, exposing [my body], with a cigarette hanging from my lips, and said, “DRINK!” just like a man. I pulled my leg up on the chair; I was irritated. Then he started to drink, and I almost got him wasted! But I was really trying to hold myself up, you know, and I knew too well I’d be knocked out soon, and I was drinking a lot of water [between shots]. Then I pointed at him with my cigarette, and I said, “You motherfucker want to fuck me? You need to make sure if your mama wants to fuck you!” And the whole table of people was shaken/in shock hahaha...</p>
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Table 4 (Continued)

Part 5 Polemic-Transformative Struggle “Polemic-transformative struggle” considers whether competing discourses can move from “a zero-sum logic” to “a profound realignment” through which new meanings emerge (p. 138).		
Positions of competing discourses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Discursive movement/action of participants</i> 	Description	Examples
Balance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Compromising</i> 	Balance: Based on “old” RDT studies (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), balance is a state of truce between competing discourses where they reached some delicate agreement through compromising actions of different parties. In balance, the force of each discourse is reduced to give some room to their competitors, thereby maintaining a careful balance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Compromising</i>: Points A and B are opposing points, and I see values in both; however, I can’t follow either completely, so I do a little bit of A and a little bit of B at the same time. 	<i>Compromising</i> : The second aspect (the first was about material contribution) is that he’s in charge at home while I’m not. I dumb myself down in front of them (her husband and mother-in-law), meaning I use all my cunningness, determination, and what others said, “dominance,” etcetera, all in my career, but I never bring them home. Maybe I’m taking advantage of the fact that I’m good at changing faces...meaning shifting [and] controlling my feelings/emotions. [At home] I’m totally a little woman. My mother-in-law and my husband are the heads/masters/leaders. I never ask about how things are done, like giving favors to others (to maintain relationships) and purchasing things. The most I do is giving some suggestions, and I never make decisions or tell them what they must do, [never demonstrating] dominance or other aspects at work at home...I appear weak when I’m with my kid, too...

Table 4 (Continued)

<p>Hybrid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Complementing</i> • <i>Queering</i> 	<p>Hybrid: A positioning of competing discourses where meaningful integration and transformation starts, moving beyond a competing, zero-sum logic to give rise to meanings rendered anew.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Complementing</i>: Points A and B are opposing points. Let's draw from what's good about A and B to create C. • <i>Queering</i>: Specifically about gender dualism, gender is currently categorized into M (male) and F (female), and entrepreneurship is associated with M. However, I think entrepreneurs should be M+F or M or F are performed and boundaries can be transgressed. 	<p><i>Complementing</i>: I remember an author has said that if the world was absent of women, it would lose 70% of its truth, 80% of kindness, and 90% of beauty. I think when dealing with issues, it's not necessary whether women or men are better or worse [than each other]. I think a balance and a complementary relation are achievable, and this complementary relation will make the entire society more harmonious and beautiful...And we've seen how feudal patriarchy [created harm] ... in fact, women's participation [in social production] is good for men, too, enabling a part of men by giving them more choice... because indeed Chinese men do not have enough approaches to de-stress, so not enough! Women's participation [in more sectors] would enable more men to experience different walks of life. It's not that only women can be in some areas, which is better for their body-mind development, instead of forcing a part of men into a corner, too...today's society should learn more from feminine things.</p> <p><i>Queering</i>: As entrepreneurs, regardless of men or women...A point I quite agree with is that people cultivate [themselves] to level up, and the highest level of human cultivation is 雌雄同体/having both male and female sexes in one body. Meaning, as a man, you need to possess some features of women, whereas as a woman, you need to possess some features of men...The higher the level of your cultivation, the more you obscure your gender.</p>
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Table 4 (Continued)

<p>Part 6 Voiced-Enacted Struggle</p>		
<p>I propose the identification of a new dimension of discursive struggle, which reconsiders the boundaries between voices and actions and meanings and matters. That is, the current RDT only focuses on spoken words in utterances and in linguistic forms; however, discursive struggles and meaning construction and transformation are often enacted through performativity or discursive practices of boundary more than just spoken words. Drawing from ideas of sociomateriality, discourses must matter/materialize in a relation for them to mean anything, and materiality is a matter of degree “depending on the number of other beings that materialize its existence” within a communicative event (Cooren, 2020). This proposed dimension of discursive struggle then sees voicing and enactment/voice and action as a continuum instead of a dualism, depending on how the bodies come together to form the time-space presence of a discourse.</p>		
<p>Positions of competing discourses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Discursive movement/action of participants</i> 	<p>Description</p>	<p>Examples</p>
<p>Enactment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To be further explored/identified in future studies</i> 	<p>Facing the normalized dominance of masculinity and male bodies, participants in their women bodies learned from experience that talking, if even allowed, might not work or be productive most of the time. However, struggles between discourses and dialogue between parties still took place in silent modes through acts, through which some sort of meaningful relational consequences would arrive.</p>	<p>In fact, I thought I was qualified/abilities were quite okay...but I couldn't say anything, could I! Leaders never considered me! There was a deputy division director in our company, who's actually a friend from the same town as me. His degree wasn't even as high as mine (in the past system, many posts were assigned by earned degrees), but he got to be a deputy division director while I wasn't even considered for a section chief by nobody! But you couldn't talk about this thing, nope, you couldn't, haha!...even if you knew in your heart, you really couldn't speak out, you could not speak out, could you! Well, you couldn't say, “Hmm, my abilities are stronger than him!” You couldn't say any of these, you know? The idea that state-owned enterprises were unfair to women comrades was something you just couldn't speak out.... I said, “I just do my part, no matter what, and that's good enough.” Because every leader of ours indeed was approving of my abilities, [saying], “[nickname] is a reliable person who can do things.”</p>

The findings in the current chapter are organized by the four dimensions of RDT. Baxter (2011) has identified four dimensions or features that help explain the discursive processes involving the tensional “co-occurrence of multiple discourses” (p. 131). To summarize, “antagonistic-nonantagonistic struggle” concerns whether and to what extent multiple semantic positions (i.e., worldviews, meanings systems, discourses, not speakers themselves, see Baxter, 2011) in dialogue clash with each other. “Direct-indirect struggle” focuses on clarity-ambiguity of utterances and how this continuum may function in the power struggle of multivocal meaning making. “Serious-playful struggle” directs attention (and tension) to the tone of utterance and how it may serve as a “sophisticated verbal resource” in the struggles of competing discourses (p. 136). Lastly, “polemic-transformative struggle” considers whether competing discourses can move from “a zero-sum logic” to “a profound realignment” through which new meanings emerge (p. 138). Importantly, these features are not mutually exclusive categories but instead are analytically orienting to different details in utterances.

In my analysis, I found traces of interplay in participants’ narratives that could support or be explained by all four dimensions. However, I also identified events and experiences in participants’ narratives where meaning systems came together to produce some relational consequences (e.g., a transformation of interpersonal relationship; trust gained from suspicious stakeholder) that could not fully be explained by these four dimensions. Specifically, in many cases (told as stories), in the face of the normalized dominance of masculinity and male bodies (e.g., being ignored or insulted as a woman), participants as the embodiment of the Other were silenced and chose not to speak (back). However, neither were they truly silenced in the sense of monologue as they spoke instead *through* taking certain actions, still addressing co-present communicators at different levels (a person, a group, a community), through which some sort of

movement between differently positioned discourses would manifest. What reflected Giddens' (1984) view on human actors' untouched knowledgeability, "founded less upon discursive than practical consciousness" (p. 26), was that sometimes participants' acting/doing preceded their own realization of intervening in the local meaning and relationships. Was dialogue between differently positioned discourses in "joint actions of speakers" not happening in these cases (Baxter, 2011, p. 165)? In a communicative event of relating, must speakers utter (words) to bring forth discursive struggles?

Regarding the tensional discursive process of identity construction, numerous studies (e.g., Connell, 2010; Harding et al., 2021; Knights, 2019; Muhr et al., 2016; Wagner, 2017) taking the performativity turn (Butler, 1999) have evidenced that discourse does not necessitate verbal utterances and people often speak (of their identities) through embodiment or enactment (i.e., performing or "doing" identities). This view aligns with SMI's situated-action view on identification, which emphasizes locale-specific (regionalized) actions of enacting identities through which identities are (re)produced. I draw on this activity-oriented perspective to propose a new feature for the dialogic process that RDT concerns, voiced-enacted struggle into consideration different degrees of materialization of discourse (Cooren, 2020).

Materiality, from a structurational perspective, entails the time-space presence and is associated with systems/recursive practices in forms of routine enactment. Because time-space zones are (re)produced through the interactive process of structuration, materiality is not what objectively exists out there (i.e., objective, external reality), but rather is a non-static situation maintained through actors' enactment, regionalized to varying degrees. This interpretation of materiality then enables a movement toward Cooren's (2020) latest new materialist account of the relationship between meaning and matter; that is, meaning must materialize to exist and

materiality is *a matter* of degree. In other words, meaning matters and demonstrates materiality through different degrees of materialization, “depending on the number of other beings that materialize its existence” to other beings (i.e., make it present, p. 3).

Cooren’s arguments extend from agential realism (Barad, 2003, 2007) that considers phenomena as being material-discursive. Materiality here concerns what comes to matter (in relations), to become present as a body (or to embody a presence), and to essentially mean something within a phenomenon (i.e., materiality is discursive; Barad, 2003, 2007).

Materialization is the key. Phenomena come to matter through materialization (or embodiment), a dynamic process that produces “the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface” (Orlikowski & Scott, 2015, p. 699), whereby some aspects/components/properties of a phenomenon *gain/become* a bodily presence *within* the phenomenon while some others do not make the cut to be considered constituents (i.e., “agential cut” see Barad, 2003, 2007). These dynamics simultaneously produce and depend on “exclusionary practices of mattering” (i.e., “apparatuses”) through which “local semantic and ontological determinacy are intra-actively enacted” (Barad, 2003, p. 820). The constitution of meaningful bodies depends on the “(re)configurings” (reordering of causal relationships) or repositioning of already relating phenomena (i.e., “intra-action”) or the local enactment of differentiation (producing boundaries). Simply put, intelligible matters always emerge at the point of doing/being/becoming (i.e., performativity) from within the relations. Importantly, performativity, through which identities are formed and boundaries are produced, extends from Butler’s emphasis on citationality (human-centered, linguistic acts) to consider multiple human and nonhuman actors/agents participating in the ongoing materialization of themselves and the phenomena they constitute. Agency, the act to participate in (re)configurings of the world, is therefore distributed among

human and nonhuman bodies making up the (presence of) phenomenon. Lastly, agency is enacted by human and/or nonhuman agents through their relating.

Drawing from this perspective, Cooren (2020) posits “the *irreducible materiality of communication* [used synonymously with ‘relation’]” (p. 6, emphasis in original). That is, the communicational/relational process entails agents (nonhuman and human) coming together to make a present of other things or people of which they speak on behalf, a simultaneous representative and constitutive view on communication. In other words, anything, *including meaning systems*, exists *through* the communicating bodies which or who themselves matter or come to mean something in this relating. Now, critically, the relational dependency of beings/bodies (on relative agents) made materiality “a matter of degree,” contingent upon “the various forms of embodiments/materializations” (p. 16). A discourse or meaning system also assumes different degrees of materiality depending on bodies coming together to make it present through performativity/enactment of meaningful boundaries and identities. This view then opens up possibilities for analysis by enabling the consideration of discursive interplay *played out* not only in and through the words that actors utter. In fact, the boundary between what is considered words and actions became flexible. Competing discourses can interplay through many different forms possible for observation.

Furthermore, in a similar sense to the identity-identification duality in SMI (i.e., identity constraints/enables identification; identification produce and reproduce identity), performing bodies in socio-materialism, as Barad (2003) contends, are *of* a relation which they constitute; that is, they come to matter and be meaningful through enacting boundary-making practices enabled and constrained within the relation. Then it is also the *movement* of the bodies of focus in this study, participants, that is the analytical goal in this section. In short, in addition to

following RDT's tradition to explore how discourses are positioned as competing, I also explore how speakers act and are made to act in and through the interplay. As a result, I intend to arrive at the identification of a new dimension of RDT. These findings are organized by the dimensions RDT identifies and the lexical markers signaling interplay.

5.1 Nonantagonistic-Antagonistic Struggle

The nonantagonistic-antagonistic struggle as a feature characterized a large number of examples, and the three existing lexical markers, entertaining, countering, negating, provided in Baxter's (2011) guideline for contrapuntal analysis sufficed in helping capture the patterns of the interplay among competing discourses identified in sections of RQ1. Specifically, entertaining, a pattern acknowledging one discursive position is but one among other possibilities, sits naturally closer to the nonantagonistic pole of the continuum, where "multiple discourses can be identified within" a speaker's utterances" (Baxter, 2011, p. 132). Whereas countering and negating are toward the antagonistic struggle. The nuances of countering and negating lies in the extent to which one position antagonizes the other.

Judging by RDT and recent studies (e.g., Dutta, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Suter et al., 2015), the former is slightly milder than the latter. In countering, the "limited worthiness" of a competing position is acknowledged before being disclaimed whereas in negating, the opposing discourse faces a complete rejection (Suter et al., 2015, p. 474). Importantly, my engagement in this specific dimension only aims to consider whether or not competing discourses could coexist in a participants' utterance (made present by them); that is, possible transformation is left for the polemic-transformative dimension, although some of the cases can certainly be explained by different dimensions.

5.1.1 Entertaining

As previously explicated (RQ1), participants' storied experiences helped reveal two sets of discourses constituting the dialectical, contradictory experiences of Chinese women who navigate the messy "women entrepreneur" identity. The Discourse of Misalignment (DOM) ongoingly troubled their alignment with their occupational identity, casting their presence to the margin of social production. On the contrary, the Discourse of Integration (DOI) included them as change agents creating new possibilities. Participants themselves have demonstrated complicated relationships with these discourses to different extents, showing a continuum of attitudes and ways in which they acted accordingly.

5.1.1.1 Conforming

The entertaining pattern was apparent in most participants' narratives about and understanding of the ways to perform the different roles and responsibilities associated with different regions of their social life (at work, at home, at their gendered location in society). Competing perspectives regarding, for example, how to be a proper Chinese woman who also has a demanding career coexisted in the sense of keeping the paradoxes alive (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). For example, Menghui shared her way of performing "balance" was that she had been, for 30 years, waking up 40 minutes before her husband every day to not only get herself ready (e.g., cleaning up and putting on makeup) but also preparing the morning routines for her husband (e.g., iron his clothes; squeeze toothpaste). One time she asked her husband, "Do you know about [these things I do]?" An act which was deemed "*jiao qing*."²⁶ The conversation went as follows:

²⁶ I include "*jiao qing*" without translation because it is an often gendered derogatory adjective that I found resists direct and even contextualized translations. It can mean something to the effect of a person attempting to attract extra attention by expressing fragility.

[He said,] “Yeah, I know.” [So I asked,] “Why haven’t you shown me some appreciation once?” [He replied,] “Isn’t it how it’s supposed to be?” [I said,] “Well, you are not wrong.” But I did not get caught up in/was not bothered by [his answer] like would some other women.

In this exchange Menghui recreated in the interview, the dominant gender discourse by which women are supposed to perform, obediently, as the primary caretaker at home began to take shape. The sentence led by “But” hinted that she indeed was aware to some extent her husband’s lack of appreciation (in this exchange, not necessarily in general) could be questionable (although she disassociated herself from women who might question it). She continued:

All these years, I’ve never let my husband [know] I was exhausted, sometimes, but I think I...did not treat it (providing service) as the reason for my exhaustion, or I wouldn’t feel bothered by this. For example, after [we] go home, I could just start to play my phone, but I still have so many things, like, for example, the documents are not yet read; the nanny didn’t fold the laundry right, so I’m willing to rearrange them; when we are on a business trip, for example, he can just take a shower, put on pajamas, and start watching TV, but I still need to hang the clothes and prepare what he’s gonna wear the next day, don’t I, and then I still need to make him some tea...these are all that I’m willing to do, but many may choose to not do these.

The way she framed her experiences and her tone made me suspect that she indeed might be conflicted about having to routinely perform these tasks. On the one hand, she did admit feeling exhaustion, and she did not hesitate to list all the tasks, including work-related ones spilling over into her “after work” life. In addition, her choice of adverbs, “still” (还要) and “just” (只要), used to modify the different activities between herself and her husband, also created a discrepancy between their routine lives. On the other hand, she would in a few sentences arrive at “I’m willing to” do these tasks, which she also deemed trivial enough for her to complete by “lifting one finger” (举手之劳) elsewhere. Not sure about her attitude on the idea that women should do it all, I asked whether she thought it might be too much for career women to do so many things and meet too many requirements, to which she responded:

No, I won't. I won't require everybody to do the same just because I do, because everyone has her own right and responsibilities to choose how much she does. But to which extent is the best? Everyone has varied standards.

Here, the entertaining pattern was explicated, as she acknowledged both her approach to maintaining family-work or *nei-wai* balance, which conformed to the discourse of women doing it all at home and alternatives other women might take. Meanwhile, she attributed agency to both her (emphasizing willingness) and alternative *choices*, not privileging one over the other. I further pushed her to consider whether she thought the gender role expectations for career women (both *zhu nei* and *zhu wai*) on the societal level were unfair, which was a point that some other participants critiqued (e.g., Congrong, Hai), to which she responded:

I think there are fewer and fewer theories like this (both *zhu nei* and *zhu wai*). Even in the past, no one said you need to do well both out there and at home. I think it might be a misunderstanding because of the changing time. In traditions, it's *nan zhu wai nv zhu nei*...maybe if you can do well at home, you don't have to go out, do you? But now that you do [get a job outside], you need to do well. Maybe that's how everybody thought and where [the idea of] doing well both at home and on the outside came from. But in reality, I think my own criterion is that women when positioning ourselves, doing well outside doesn't mean you must be a woman entrepreneur, a top leader, or some guru. My understanding is that out there, you get the job for your position done, and then also should do well at home, so maybe everybody's understanding and criterion are different...you don't have to be somebody [in great positions] to both do well at home and outside. For me, as long as you can fulfill the responsibilities for your position to perfection, doing the best you can, and fulfill your roles at home, you are a good woman.

In this excerpt, while she was still keeping her ideation expansive, emphasizing different understandings and criteria, she still talked the tie between women's labor and home/the inside into an inevitable one. Women fulfilling gender roles at home was also prioritized over the possibilities of taking leadership roles and positions of power and achieving greatness, contradicting her own experience as the leader of an established, regionally well-known enterprise. Despite her perhaps doing exceptionally well on the outside, *moved by* the unescapable "doing well at home" in a primary caretaker style, she *conformed* to traditions by

doing it all. Menghui was not alone in this experience; other participants from the same and different generations (e.g., Yuehui, Post-60s; Fang, Post-80s) also took a doing it all approach, sometimes framed as willingly, while also acknowledging other choices.

The pattern of acknowledging, even identifying with alternative perspectives, while being moved to conform to the dominant discourse was also seen regarding performing (paradoxical) gender identities *of* and at work as women entrepreneurs. Consider what Hai said in different parts of the interview below:

You know why people like [Mingzhu Dong] act so dominantly as women, berating people all day—you see she's criticizing people all day in those clips—because if you, a woman, don't be so dominant, someone's gonna defeat you, kill you, you know, and attack you. So [you] turn yourself into a man... [comparing my morning routines to yours], I must put on makeup half an hour ahead, to go out looking pretty, don't I?...and put on different clothes everyday...women still hope others say that you are tender, pretty, successful in career, and in the meantime can take care of your husband. Well, everybody's definition and assessment criteria (speaking in English here) are different, so I hope to tell all women that while pursuing your career, you also need to do exercise, be pretty and work out as needed, and allow yourself to age gracefully. In fact, I think [Mingzhu Dong] could be more feminine, and it's unnecessary to be so aggressive every day...everybody has different choices...I think, facing those men, you don't have to—she has no choice but to resist, maybe because she has to do that at her level. So, I mean, girls still need to pay attention to dress up and be more delicate regardless of how busy you are.

In these utterances, it was apparent that she acknowledged both performing masculinity and femininity, albeit with a little struggle. Her alignment with the competing discourses identified previously was also messy, as femininity was rendered both unsuitable (for survival) and desirable. Her perception of gender identification at work became paradoxical, only seeing gender through dualism, wherein masculinity was stereotypically associated with aggression and dominance and male bodies while femininity with tenderness (and reduced to appearance) and women bodies. Although “turning yourself into a man” mattered to her in terms of survival, it contradicts the femininity she understood. Personally, she conformed to gender norms by

highlighting and maintaining stereotypical femininity (while elsewhere, she also shared experiencing punishment because of embodying femininity). Interestingly, similar discussions specifically about the paradoxical performing of femininity and masculinity involving Dong Mingzhu's identity enactment occurred in several interviews. In the focus group, for instance, participants agreed that, as women entrepreneurs, they possessed "boldness/daring and authority" that "men are supposed to have" and women's tenderness (there was a queering potential, see later), and, when Dong was mentioned, they agreed on one woman's remark: "In my heart, the image [of a woman entrepreneur] is Mingzhu Dong, but I'd like her more if she could smile more."

5.1.1.2 Disassociating (to Entertain)

Another discursive movement that participants demonstrated occurred in the entertaining pattern of competing discourses was disassociating. By conforming, participants aligned with or moved towards one of the alternatives all granted legitimacy. Disassociating differed slightly in having a clearer pattern resembling what follows: Points A and B are both valid, but I would not choose A/B. Peiran's discussion in a context of talking about women's emancipation associated with more women participating in social production explicated this pattern:

Yeah yeah yeah, [emancipation] takes time, and it's beyond what I can influence as one person. Well, some women like to rear children at home, which is their choice of lifestyle and has nothing wrong with it. Some folks think it's also comfortable that way. But I think the risk might be a bit high. It's like you are betting on your husband, but what if he went out for someone else, and what if he and you didn't have a good relationship, you know, you'd have to restart all your bets again. [I]d rather depend on myself, which feels more reliable, psychologically...unless your relationship is exceptionally great, which I think is not bad. It's her choice, after all.

Here, she clearly acknowledged both positions regarding women having a career or relational security at home. Then using a gambling analogy, she disassociated herself from staying at home and relying on a husband option without disclaiming its validity. This discursive practice was

also common among participants, especially in their naturally emerged discussions about the identity and life as women entrepreneurs or, more broadly, career women in contrast to “other women” or “regular women.” In this pattern, they invoked a “*by choice*” discourse regarding more progressive actions taken by “women of the new age” and more “traditional” practices of “some/many/other women” (e.g., Qiang; Shanglan). Although both were deemed valid based on the context (i.e., entertaining), they disassociated themselves from the more traditional staying-at-home style, a choice attributable to their personalities, interests, abilities, family cultivation, ecological factors (e.g., poverty of rural life), and more. Disassociating also occurred when competing discourses are positioned to be *countering* each other.

5.1.2 Countering

Moments where the two sets of discourses were in countering positions were plenty. They usually manifested as participants and relational partners giving examples reflecting one discourse to counter the other one while siding with the another.

5.1.2.1 Disassociating (to Counter)

Countering was more prevalent in participants’ accounts of “other women” and “regular women,” whom they may or may not know personally, regarding their life choice and/or managerial style. Disassociating commonly occurred in this talk. For example, in her critique about lasting gender inequality in a context where she reflected on challenges facing women entrepreneurs, Qiang also stated:

First of all, in this process, women should be more independent. But some women, you see in today’s society, some women completely don’t want these (things related to independence), and she’d rather submit herself to men to get living expenses. She’s willing to do those things. Many are like this...I found that many of my male schoolmates at [a famous business school in China]...thought women are easy and would follow me for money. But see, when I sit in front of [him], and I’m richer than [him], he won’t say such things. I think this is understandable; they result from the push of society...so, regarding this phenomenon, I think women should be more *zhiqiang* (a close

translation is self-reliant, but not fully grasps the meaning) to let others value you...When others look down on you or treat you unfairly, maybe the first [reason] is that you don't *zhiqiang*/respect yourself.

In this excerpt, she made the competing positions of the misalignment and integration discourses by considering the relative positions of bodies in both distal and proximal sites (independent women like her vs. some of her male colleagues and women who were willing to submit) who were agents of these discourses. The two discourses were in a countering relation, as she also tried to understand/explain what she did not approve of (i.e., to get money; the push of social environment). In her critique that also problematically concluded with solely attributing inequality to “some women’s” behaviors (i.e., change the women narrative), she disassociated independent women from women who submit to men, thereby perpetuating a gendered stereotype about women. Common in interviews was a similar tendency of attributing gender inequality, biases, and exclusion—factors underlying the misalignment discourse—to some other women through scapegoating while being more forgiving about structural constraints (i.e., the lack of resource). Another brief example was blaming their perceived absence of women in positions of power (e.g., top managers, government officials) to women’s lack of intentionality regarding career pursuit and desires for easy lives, such as when Tianjing and Xia both criticized women “in surrounding counties” or “[her] village” for indulging themselves in recreational activities (e.g., playing cards or mahjong). Participants moved through the countering pattern by disassociating themselves from other agents of the opposing discourse.

On another layer, the move of disassociating when competing discourses countered one another also occurred as participants discussed how other *women and men* performed entrepreneurial and/or managerial identities. Many examples are included in the previous theme, *women/femininity enriches entrepreneurship*, in which participants challenged masculine norms

by considering what women could do better, thereby putting femininity and women bodies in superior positions, although still perpetuating gender dualism.

5.1.2.2 Obsoleting

Another practice that participants performed when they were moved by the competing, countering discourses was obsoleting, or the process of making something outdated. This move has the feature of participants' invoking discourses of misalignment to only associate it with traditions and what was in the past time-space (therefore only granting it legitimacy in a specific temporal context) while situating DOI in the present and future. This positioning then disclaims the relevance of certain views in the current time.

Here is one quick example from Quan:

In Ancient China, there was “the three obediences and the four virtues/三从四德,” and “a woman's virtue is to have no talent/女子无才便是德,” but not anymore. Nowadays, but a lot of women are indeed stronger than men when they work.

In this utterance, she invoked specific idioms informing the DOM only to declaim their relevance to the contemporary context. Another example was from Jiefei. She reflected on how, about two decades earlier, people in her village (including her parents) would gossip about her for not knowing what she was doing (instead of having a stable job), all while being divorced, which was voiced as unacceptable by phrases such as “married to a rooster, follow a rooster; married to a dog, follow a dog” (嫁鸡随鸡嫁狗随狗, emphasizing obedience) in “traditional Chinese culture.” This account led to her saying, “Today's people are different...” and:

This is a time of “public innovation and mass entrepreneurship” (大众创新, 万众创业). Women must have their own careers. Have you seen this thing [circulated] online? It's about a celebrity—I didn't pay much attention—like “when getting (or still) married, he said, ‘I will feed (provide for) you when you stop working,’ and then after the marriage, when divorcing, [he] said, “Hey, even you are fed by me (expressing ownership).” It's something like that, been viral online. So, it's also a [reminder] for women. Now women all started entrepreneurship, [or] all have jobs, and some of the traditional ideas in the past will be gone.

In her account of different experiences involving addresses and voices (fellow villagers and online discourse) located in different time and space (including virtual space), the countering positions of misalignment discourse and integration discourse were established. Further, she framed the discourses of women's unconditional dependency on men/husband characterized by the objectification of women (hinted in the idiom and also the online discourse) as part of the past or as passing ("will be gone") traditions, not belonging in an era characterized by mass progression and women's independence. In this framing, the DOM was rendered obsolete.

In another case, Congrong drew an analogical link between the long-abandoned foot-binding practice in Chinese history and more contemporary "mental shackles" on women. In the example below, she used the British "Gentleman Culture" as an example of cultural constraints on women in general. Throughout her interview, she also called out other forms of "mental shackles" on women entrepreneurs and career women in China, such as "*nv zhu nei*" discourse and the expectation for mothers to be constantly around their children:

Like the U.K. example I was talking about (at a dinner party), they (women in the United Kingdom) did not care for gentlemen or men opening the car door for her. She'd think, "I can do what boys can, just as good."...these behaviors, in fact (female fragility and U.K. Gentlemen Etiquette) constrain women, you know, constraining you with a sort of mental shackles: You women must be like this...or you are considered barbaric...it's in fact similar to foot-binding in China, [which] constrains you physically, didn't it? It's indeed still a kind of inequality when it's the many social rules that intangibly constrain you mentally...you've got to be daring to break [traditions] and be innovative, which is part of the entrepreneurial spirit. If you dare not to break conventions, you are not a real entrepreneur, aren't you?

Similar practices of obsoleting, casting certain gender discourses to a time that was fading away and therefore delegitimizing them in the present and future times, was common. Whereas China's long history made some traditions hopelessly impenetrable, as shown in the previous section, it simultaneously offered participants a sensemaking space in which they could store and

move forward from some oppressive materialized discursive practices that they hope not to carry on. In a critique of China's state derived feminist rhetoric, Edwards (2007) argued that the practice of attributing gender inequality and struggles in China to history, captured by the term "feudal remnants," allowed for excusing the current political systems from taking responsibilities. However, on a micro-level, the discursive practice of obsoleting oppressive gender discourses (that were nonetheless still very much alive in living language) that participants performed, might indeed momentarily be empowering. Every time they used words such as "*chuan tong de*" (traditional), "*yi qian de/guo qu de*" (past) to modify certain practices captured in idioms, they rendered them irrelevant to a new era where changes were emerging and hope could be seen.

5.1.3 Negating

The negating pattern was also prominent throughout my interviews. The nuance between countering and negating is reflected in linguistic markers that suggest the extent to which one discourse with which a speaker aligns rejects or invalidates a competing position (Baxter, 2011; Suter et al., 2015). Negating is elicited through a firm disclaiming of the value of competing discursive positions. In participants' accounts, there were of course many moments where participants' positions were negated by the dominant discourse invoked by another speaker. For example, the utterance: "Woman, why don't you just stay at home?" (Qiang), can be used to show how participants created a negating pattern and how their discursive move was enabled and constrained by this positioning.

The negating pattern could be quickly established and identified by the word "不/no," which is itself a clear marker of negation (Horn & Wansing, 2020) in participants' utterances. Participants all said "no" to certain conventional ideas, which fueled the discourses of

misalignment of how women should behave in, for example, obedient and restrained ways. For example, Qiang stated, “I think a woman, (in imperative utterances) *do not* depend on the family; *do not* depend on the husband! That she herself is having a career that she enjoys is good enough. It doesn’t matter how much [she] earns.” By the two imperative utterances marked by “do not” (不要 + verb), she called forth the competing discourse (female dependency) only to reject it by aligning with women participating in work and embracing selfhood. Another common way to establish the negating pattern was saying “can’t,” (不能) a direct rejection to expectations or requirements they deemed unreasonable. Consider what Ruoyun said in response to the do-it-all type of maintaining balance: “For real, a woman can’t give consideration/taking care of too many things, because I am a person, too, aren’t I? [Speaking of] my energy, it’s impossible that I attend to every respect. It’s too hard.” In a negating pattern, she invalidated the DOM by rendering it impossible.

5.1.3.1 Rebellious

Participants were further compelled by a negating pattern to move or take discursive actions against dominant discourses (misalignment). Rebellious was a recurring one featuring participants taking counteractions in the face of negative voices (e.g., specific naysayers; biased assumptions about women). Now an established woman entrepreneur (who also gained a political status), Jiefei shared many doubtful, slanderous, and belittling voices against her entrepreneurial identity from different people, including stakeholders (e.g., neighbors, officials in a government department) in her accounts of her long process. Toward the end of the interview, she responded to the question “what experiences would she share with a group of women who want to be entrepreneurs?” (future-oriented) by recalling what she had said based, on her past

experiences, to her audience when being invited to give a speech at a college on an International Women's Day:

Fear only that you get discouraged as soon as others [criticize] you, [saying things like,] “Alright, I quit!” Then another day, you get your confidence shaken when someone else is saying things about you. You’d accomplish nothing this way!...if we encountered difficulties, like when others said this and that about you...I’d say, “You, the more you say I can’t [be successful?], the more I—the pressure you give me, in fact, is also motivation—the more I do!” I said [to my audience] that’s how I overcame [difficulties]. Others said this and that about me. *I’m going to deliberately show you!*

The negating pattern emerged through the dialogue she recreated between “others,” a symbolic naysayer embodying people whom she interacted with, and herself, while also involving present and future audiences. Consistent through these intertwining timelines was her rejection of the various agents of the DOM, in a rebellious style, by not giving in facing their negation. A rebellious move was fleshed out by the stressed utterance, “*I’m going to deliberately show you!*” Indeed, the English translation could not fully capture the power. In the Chinese utterance “*wo jiu pian yao zuo gei ni kan/我就偏要做给你看*” the third character “*pian*” was commonly used to express a strong rebellious attitude, signaling precisely the intension and agency to “act otherwise” in the face of rules.

There was a commonly occurred layer of complexity to rebelling involving simultaneously resisting and reinforcing gendered assumptions informed by gender dualism.

Consider Bing’s response to the same question mentioned above:

I think the story I’d tell them would be, well, first of all, girls must on the one hand be warned of and on another abandon the stereotypes the outside world has for women. We can’t realize stereotypes. We must, for example, others say women are petty, don’t they, and frail, so we women doing entrepreneurship must be magnanimous, utilizing our advantages as mothers [to be] generous, inclusive/forgiving, and loving and wilding the strengths of women. After we realize our shortcomings, we must try hard to avoid [them]. You must be magnanimous. Then they say, like, “You, a woman, have no willpower.” So, you must learn to be committed to your resolution. Therefore, if you can accomplish these points, I think women usually can turn the stereotypes and weaknesses people [have

for and perceive on] her into a foundation, strengths, and something that support her progression.

The negating pattern was reflected in her opening utterances in this excerpt, as she mentioned gender stereotypes in public discourses attached to women on one hand while poignantly framed them as being made real (materialize, enactment). The Chinese phrase was “*zuo shi*/made real” in a literal sense. “We can’t realize stereotypes” was where she took a rebelling move. As she continued, however, she soon reinforced static, trait-based/essentialist views on gender identities informed by dualism, which could turn a movement stagnant as leadership and entrepreneurship might be once again associated with qualities/traits (e.g., male magnanimity vs. female pettiness) already martialized to be male/masculine. Granted, she found an embodied source *made essential* to women—motherhood—for characteristics similar to magnanimity (i.e., generosity, inclusivity). Although this strategy (associating women’s strength with motherhood) came with other issues discussed previously.

Regardless of the problematics stemming from gender dualism (the moments where they reinforced gender dualism, which is hard to unlearn), rebelling was an empowering move many participants performed in both the rhetorical event of the interview and through their specific entrepreneurial activities and other processes in life. In varied relational contexts, some participants acted as rebellious daughters, wives, “female comrades,” women members, women leaders, and more against materialized discourses of misalignment that asked them not to take certain actions (e.g., giving up a stable job and starting a business) that upset the masculine order.

5.1.3.2 Questioning

Another practice that participants performed when moved by the competing, negating discourses was questioning, in a literal sense, by directly asking why, sometimes in intensified

tones, as a way to challenge or put the legitimacy of dominant discourse into question. This move occurred mostly when participants called upon the DOI to negate misalignment to arrive at a question or questions that challenged the legitimacy of the status quo (not necessarily in this order).

Questioning utterances targeting the dominant discourse and current practices occurred in many participants' narratives. For example, Qiang expressed her disgust for a common socializing practice for *businessmen*, going to nightclubs where they could “choose women.” “I hate it with a passion when others pick women! I was like, ‘WHY? A group of women for you guys to pick?’ It should be reversed. Should there also be someplace for us women entrepreneurs to pick men?” This questioning occurred when she was accounting for occasions of business socializing where she saw gender inequality manifested. She used “凭什么/*ping shen me*” which could be considered a firmer way of asking why. Similarly, some participants asked why to express their distaste and rejection for the “alcohol culture” (see 4.1.1 and 4.1.5) as part of the routine socializing practice.

For example, Quan said, “WHY YOU HAVE TO BULLY ME JUST BECAUSE I AM A WOMAN?” when talking about how one time a man was pushing her to drink a lot and started touching her. She forced the man to back down by performing an aggressive version of masculinity (discussed later). Questioning also occurred in utterances where different ideas of maintaining work-family balance or family harmony (all on women vs. shared responsibilities) clashed. For example, two Post-90s women (Mingran and Zihan) almost had the same utterances when rejecting ideas such as “*xiang fu jiao zi*/相夫教子” or “*nan zhu wai nv zhu ne*/男主外女主内” while only seeing a concerted approach as reasonable. PT said, “*That’s right!* We are all equals, and [women also are] bearing a lot. Why ask women to take more [domestic chores]?”

They should be shared [based on] a mutual understanding [between the spouse].” Zihan said cathartically:

Why must all these family duties be assigned to women? Is it enough that men only care about earning money while not about the family? Is it okay? [if a man didn't take part in taking family responsibilities]...why would I bother marrying him? I could just adopt a child from overseas, couldn't I?

Here, she not only negated the idea of women doing it all at home but also turned to question the institution of marriage.

Lastly, participants also questioned biased assumptions attached to women and female bodies on occasions when the dominant discourse was most present. For example, Qiuyun, whose company was specialized in sports equipment and gear, was herself an active participant and a record holder in a specific type of extreme sport, but people would comment on her body stature when talking about her involvement in it. She used this example in her discussion about how she disliked the term “woman entrepreneur,” as she considered the “woman” part was associated with the perceived differences between men and women regarding “the things they do” (e.g., hobbies) and “fixed understanding” of women many people, including women, had:

I felt [the difference between men and women can be attributed to] that for a long time, there's a framework in society's definition for women that goes, for example, others may say (e.g., reporter), “You look so fragile, different from what we imagined, but you can [participate in extreme sports].” I said, “Why can't I [participate]?”...I've got to tell them, and I said, “It's not only for guys...girls can [do it, too], depending on if you are willing or wanting to.” So yeah, [being] a woman entrepreneur or something [also] depends on whether she's willing to do the thing, which I think is very important, because many girls, in terms of their personalities, [they] are willing to back down...but it doesn't mean they can't do it. It's just many people's ways of thinking have been fixed or impacted to a great extent.

In this account, Qiuyun activated the negating position against the fixed, biased understanding of women (i.e., women could not do certain things due to being fragile) by questioning (“Why can't I?”) the agent of the dominant discourse immediately. Taking the negating stance, she also

reflected on the social construction of gender itself, to consider gender differences regarding intentionality as resulted from the ongoing defining of women (and men), which perhaps could be undefined through enacting abilities (doing).

5.2 Direct-Indirect Struggle

In RDT, the dimension of direct-indirect struggle concerns the ways “ambiguity of meaning” (Baxter, 2011, p. 134) functions in the interpenetration of discourses. Baxter identified three discursive ways. First, ambiguity may create a “semantic wiggle room” for involved parties to avoid direct interplay between competing discourses (p. 134). Second, ambiguity may produce or further marginalization of alternative discourses by not responding to issues directly. Third, ambiguous speech may “temper the authoritativeness of a dominant discourse” (p. 136) by using markers indicating degree, such as “sometimes” and “some people,” to indirectly reduce the legitimacy of an otherwise centered discourse. In participants' interviews, I found two specific practices that fit the description of the first and third functions, treating ambiguity as an additional lexical marker for contrapuntal analysis.

5.2.1 Ambiguity: Creating Semantic Wiggle Room

5.2.1.1 Shifting

One way that an ambiguous positioning of competing discourses manifest was through the practice of shifting between positions in one account (about one topic), which seemed to help participants evade the direct collision between an identified status quo perpetuating the misalignment discourse and a critical stand against it. Consider what Cuiwei said about, in a heterosexual marriage, who should be taking domestic responsibilities, which was considered a major challenge to women entrepreneurs. By the misalignment discourse, women should continue performing most house chores, whereas, by integration discourses, responsibilities should be negotiated and shared between family members, opening to different possibilities.

Cuiwei started by establishing the relative positions of both discourses based on her observation. To her, women entrepreneurs were expected to “first take care of the family because family is the key...second secure our social status, so we offer way more than men.” On the other hand, recalling a dinner party we attended together, she stated:

But still, there are-see the two sirs we met the other day, one of them said that he supported and understood his wife and that he shared house chores, didn't he? But he's just one case, not the majority...a small portion of men would share house chores with women. But [saying this is] not blaming men or something because, [considering] traditions and ways of thinking and customs, they are influenced by the environment.

In this excerpt, she presented/reinforced a reality in which women, regardless of career choices, must prioritize being a caretaker at home while men were exempted from domestic chores based on “traditions;” in the same reality, however, the alternative practice also existed, albeit marginalized (“small portion”). Her practice of “not blaming” the men while foregrounding “environment” as the factor (the last sentence) suggested an unfrontational position, which might be her attempt to elide tensions between groups involved. She further considered how men were also constrained (and enabled) by gender discourses to not take common house chores, only to arrive at a view aligning with the DOI:

Nowadays, there are “househusbands,” but not a lot. He's always the target of controversies and side-eyes, so his self-consciousness is also like, “I am a man. I shouldn't do these.” Or, he's not thinking he shouldn't, but maybe he lacks initiatives. So, usually, we women, after going home, may still need to take kids [to school] or [help them] study, and then do laundry or some other house chores, but a man, maybe he can actually sit there reading newspapers and sipping tea and call it a day...well yeah, as a matter of fact, they could also take part in [chores], so, as the social status of Chinese women grows, more and more men took their part, but, of course, [one's] economic status determines the family status...if the two of us earn a similar amount of money, he will consciously think the home is one shared by us...and then it's only [reasonable] that I share [house chores] with you.

In the first half of the excerpt, Cuiwei seemed to have shifted from imagining how a househusband would also be constrained by discourses to envisioning how a househusband was

no longer enabled by the taken-for-granted or conventional discourses to not take domestic chores. She was likely drawing on her husband's behavior to create this image because she would later also use the language of “缺乏主动性” or lacking initiatives to describe him. In the latter half, she aligned with the view that in dual-career families, chores should be split. She shared an observation (“more and more men...”) potentially contradicting her previously shared “not a lot” or only “a small portion” of men were taking on house chores. The ambiguity of her statement and observation was also marked by her mixed use of words such as “maybe” and “actually.” Yet further in, her alignment with different discourses would become more ambiguous when she described the dynamic between her and her husband. She said, “We used to live with friends...nobody thought we distributed [chores] unevenly,” and proceeded to describe how she and their nanny took care of chores. I probed again by saying, “You just mentioned it's tiring that women need to take multiple responsibilities.” She responded:

Well yeah! Like you have a few clothes hanging there for a few weeks, don't you, your husband absolutely won't take the initiative to take them back!...I've never seen any man put clothes in categories and put them back in the closets on his initiative...only women do this thing...I don't think this needs to be changed. It's natural...I think [homemaking] is what women are supposed to do...because women do take charge at home and prioritize home...

Here, she contradicted what she said in preceding utterances by shifting back to a view aligning with the conventional gender roles of women. Although she described her husband as lacking initiative (also elsewhere, she said, “He needs to be asked, not on his initiative”) in taking family responsibilities, she avoided framing it in more confrontational ways, as would some other participants do. In this more elaborated example, Cuiwei shifted back and forth between competing perspectives to create ambiguity, leaving a “semantic wiggle room” (Baxter, 2011, p. 134), to perhaps (1) not frame her own family relationship in confrontational terms and (2) not confront the current gender order too much. This ambiguous discursive positioning of competing

perspectives may not be intentional at all, manifesting instead the contradictory realities comprised of paradoxical practices (e.g., double binds) many career women live (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). This shifting enactment of ambiguity was also noticeable in other participants' interviews, such as when Hai *criticized and agreed on* the need to maintain balance by women doing more and to perform femininity, and when Mengting shifted attitudes and understanding regarding whether women were treated unequally in professional settings and whether “glass ceiling” existed, amidst other examples.

5.2.2 Ambiguity: Tempering the Authoritativeness

5.2.2.1 Quantifying

I also found another more straightforward practice enacting ambiguity that fits the third function described in RDT, that is, to temper the authoritativeness of locally centralized discourse. This specific practice was characterized by clear uses of quantifiers to keep the utterance expansive. For example, Aixiang stated:

I think female entrepreneurs and male entrepreneurs are indeed different. Women entrepreneurs, in fact, have their advantage in that, firstly, speaking of the “woman nature,” they have their tender side, and so they can do better than men regarding relational communication, well, mostly, not absolutely.

A quantifying practice is readily apparent in this statement. The centralized DOI, emphasizing women's strength, was made less questionable by her disclaimer of absolutism. Many participants also would (confidently or hesitantly) take a guess to provide percentages regarding generalized differences between groups (e.g., men vs. women; career moms vs. stay-at-home moms). For example, Congrong stated:

I think 80% of [the case?] is men being outside, while career women can account for up to 20% of the total. Many women maybe have a job, but they cannot really be called “career women.” Maybe she has a stable occupation and a stable income, but maybe she's just muddling through with this job, you know what I mean, not that she has a career [plan] for herself. Like when I hired a person, I'd ask, “Do you have a future

career plan?” Many may not have one, thinking instead I’m just finding a job...that’s not a career woman. I think I’d be pleased if there were 20% real career women.

In these utterances, regardless of how “career” was defined here, she gave a specific ratio to simultaneously express her assumption that women lack career intentionality while leaving perhaps just enough space for counterevidence (including herself). I wondered if the number 20% came from the 20% baseline in terms of women’s political participation (see Tian & Bush, 2020).

Participants also enacted quantifying to mitigate threats, such as blatant discrimination and sexual harassment, to perhaps keep the reality pleasant in general. For example, when answering the question of when her gender identity would become sensitive in entrepreneurial activities, Peiran answered:

Oh yeah. There has been the kind of “boss” (how business owners were often referenced), like, although you thought it’s just normal interaction, but...he has ulterior motives. Oh yeah, [they exist]! And then you thought you could ignore [him], but he’d take a yard after given an inch...I’ve encountered [people like this] too, but I have a big heart, and then nothing really happened...there’s one that was obvious, and then others at most just from time to time asked you to go drink or attend a dinner party [with them], which were not too bad...the obvious one really truly was one of the very few examples...it was an indirect collaboration between enterprises...he’d invite you to their company to attend a dinner party, [after which] he could not keep his hands to himself...but it’s just an individual case, very rare. His companions would protect you, too, knowing what kind of person he was...it’s rare, but “often wading by the river, you cannot avoid getting your shoes wet.” I used to think no one would really go over the line, but some people really had no boundaries.

In this account about her experience of (intended) sexual harassment from male business partners, she used many different quantifiers (e.g., one vs. others, at most, individual, rare) and even an adage that stated the inevitability of bad happenings when being in a certain environment (常在河边走哪有不湿鞋/often wading by the river, you cannot avoid getting your shoes wet). By these practices, she on the one hand acknowledged the existence of sexual harassment while, on the other hand, presented an overall tolerable (“not too bad”) environment

where women entrepreneurs could exist. Recursively using qualifiers to indicate the infrequency of specific cases of gender discrimination and sexual harassment and then associating these behaviors more to specific individuals rather than men as a whole was a common strategy among participants who shared these experiences, perhaps to help themselves maintain a more optimistic outlook.

5.3 Serious-Playful Struggle

Further investigation on cases of how participants negotiated their (often sexualized) bodily presence in different places where they conducted business activities also shed some light on the serious-playful dimension of RDT, which to date remains unexplored in RDT studies. According to Baxter (2011), the serious-playful struggle considers the “tone of an utterance” and how different tones could challenge a competing discourse in unique ways. In the current RDT framework, based on Bakhtin’s Burlesque caricatures, there are three “devices” or “stances,” namely, rogue, fool, and clown, which communicators can take to enact playful struggles (see Baxter, 2011). None of these, however, could describe the playful (and serious) tones/stances I identified in my participants’ accounts, specifically in instances or episodes where they negotiated or maintained the legitimacy and *safety* of their often, under masculine norms, objectified bodies, especially at business meals. Following the tradition on which RDT is based, I also present three caricatures based on participants’ lived stories. These stances are the senior, the witty, and the *xia*.

5.3.1 Seriousness

5.3.1.1 The Senior

The most common device that participants enact on occasions where they felt the sensitivity, awkwardness, or even threat associated with their gender identity (here, being a woman) was the senior, who is professional, experienced, *older*, and overall *serious* about

business. By enacting/performing the senior stance, participants enact professional women identities to keep at bay discourses that they might consider to be sources of unsettlement. For example, when she was younger, Jiefei had encountered both male leaders in government departments or other powerful male stakeholders who have “ulterior motives” and “can’t keep their hands to themselves” and those who would say, “leave the door open” whenever she showed up at their offices. Both occasions made her felt awkward. Sometimes, when she went to report to government officials, she would also be told, “Hey, little girl, ask your chair of the board to come. Why are *you* here?”

It’s like the chair of the board must be an old man or whatever...I was always treated like a secretary to the chair. So, after that...when I was starting my business, I even cut off my long hair, and deliberately dressed up in simple, old-fashioned styles...to make myself appear experienced, giving others the sense that *hey, I am* the chair.

Through this symbolic action, she enacted the senior device to counter the DOM. Another young participant, Fang, who is in her late 20s, was using the exact same practice to avoid “inconveniences” by “not wearing clothes that were too feminine...the conservative types or simply professional attires.” She would do the “man’s thing,” such as paying for a meal, keeping her voice and look firm, not saying much but only expressing “appropriate amount of politeness,” so that she was revealing little and encouraging the sense of “don’t know what this woman is thinking.” In addition, she would only have the meal without the drinking part, thus making it a practice to avoid “things like going to karaoke and getting a massage” (common socializing activities for business). In Fang’s case, the serious senior device was activated by the misalignment discourse, by which femininity was only associated with objects, behaviors (*including the tone*), and meanings not suitable for professional settings. Many participants shared similar ideas of enacting the senior stance through nuanced ways of performing

seriousness. Sometimes the senior would appear on a business occasion with a small team of professionals, further establishing her legitimacy and seriousness.

The serious stance of the senior was common in many participants' practices. Many of the instances in which this serious stance was discussed were juxtaposed ironically against playful, humorous tones during the interview narratives. Almost all participants discussed the ways in which they took up the senior stance, whereas playfulness, especially when addressing the co-present male bodies in business socializing, was rare. Even so, I still found two specific playful stances taken by two participants to avoid sexual harassment in situations when professional seriousness might not be effective.

5.3.2 Playfulness

5.3.2.1 The Witty

Moving toward the playful struggle, the witty stance might be enacted by participants in intricate situations when, like Cuiwei said in English, you could not directly “say no” to men in power in situations where faces must be maintained for businesses to be done. The witty knew how to move her body and present herself in playful manners to momentarily evade the physical grasp symbolizing the normalized sexual harassment and the domination of women. A witty stance might also be taken by mobilizing other sources of empowerment or conjuring forth (make presence) other bodies of power to level up oneself in the discursive interplay. In what follows, I present how Hai “cunningly make[s] him (a male leader) not feel awkward.”

In recalling a case previously shared by her where she expressed her disgust for being inappropriately touched (e.g., touched, hugged, pinched) by a male government leader who was a stakeholder for her program, she shared different ways how she, as well as other party attendees,

prevented the harassment from escalating. A specific “cunning” way she shared was to distract him with dishes, as she performed the traditional role of dinner host:

I said, “Oh hey, look! A new dish arrived! Try something else!” (performing reaching out to something in the air while swaying her body to one side) Like you’d push him away and protect yourself. And others [sitting around] would [help], too...I hated it so much and I [felt] disgust[ed] by it, but I also knew he wouldn’t dare to [really do anything]. And, you just cunningly make him (a male leader) not feel awkward.

Later, as her network grew larger and she grew more sophisticated, she had more “cards” to play in similar socializing events or other occasions (office visit) where she could sense ulterior motives (e.g., being called to meet in an office more than needed). She explained:

Now I’d half-mindedly/intentionally-unintentionally announce that I, “Well, I am introduced by this leader to be here.” That is, frankly speaking, I have someone behind me...I play the card. Don’t you have some wild thoughts about me! You’ve got to learn these things in China...if you are going to beat a dog, you need to see who’s the owner (proverb: 打狗还要看主人), don’t you? Or “not for the monk's sake, but for the Buddha's” (不看僧面看佛面, meaning forgive, tolerate, or enable someone out of the consideration of the “face” of a third party)...I never wanted to tell that I knew somebody, but you had no choice...or else not only would the thing be unachievable, but he’d harass/bully you.

By wittingly making other people in power present, who served as her sponsors, she materialized her legitimacy in her interaction with people who may see her as the target of their display of power (e.g., sexual harassment), whose action was enabled by the DOM. The two proverbs she utilized to frame the playing a card strategy were themselves playful and humorous, further explicating a witty stance.

5.3.2.2 The Xia

Xia/侠 is a heroic, romantic character archetype in Chinese literary works. A *xia* is bold and forthright and unrestrained but following some creeds, who enforces justice and helps others (and themselves) in unique ways. Many characters in Chinese history can be deemed *xias*. Female, male, and nonbinary *xias* are nowadays mostly known as the characters in Chinese

martial art/kung fu fiction (think of the protagonists in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*). *Xia* can also be used on characters like Robin Hood from Western classic literature. The fuller meaning of *Xia* is beyond the scope of my project, but the stance of the *xia* can be a playful one featuring an untamable nature and no longer restrained (but not unconstrained) enactment, potentially evoking unexpectedness in a taken-for-granted situation sanctioned by dominant discourses, thereby thrusting in the norms to create a local exigency where changes may be possible. Indeed, the idea of presenting *xia* as such a device was inspired by Cuiwei, who was called “*xia jie*” (*xia* sister) by her friends and colleges for being a “leader of positive energy,” having a “careless disposition,” and can “making jokes with anybody.” But it was Quan’s story that demonstrated this stance well:

Sometimes girls wear like V-necks under a blazer, and I was a bit thick/curvy back then, which may be tantalizing/turn you on/elicite improper thoughts, and we were drinking [at a business dinner party]. In fact, most people were good, but one, [a Director of General Office], who really had drunk too much and couldn’t keep his hands to himself...but I was more of a man to my heart, and I was annoyed [that] he wanted to intoxicate me/get me wasted. So, I put a cigarette between my lips and was like, “Now, light this up for me first.” He did just as I said docilely/like a good boy. I said, “Three shots, you and me, bottom-up.” Then he started to cringe. “Aren’t you asking me to drink!” I said, “So, I drink, but you don’t?” And he was [indicating] he only wanted me to drink, getting me wasted, so he’d be the winner, wouldn’t he? Then I wouldn’t allow it. I was wearing a tank top under my blazer because it was hot that day, and I got this tattoo. [So I] pulled off my blazer, leaving only the tank top on, exposing [my body], with a cigarette hanging from my lips, and said, “DRINK!” just like a man. I pulled my leg up on the chair; I was irritated. Then he started to drink, and *I almost got him wasted!* But I was really trying to hold myself up, you know, and I knew too well I’d be knocked out soon, and I was drinking a lot of water [between shots]. Then I pointed at him with my cigarette, and I said, “*You motherfucker want to fuck me? You need to make sure if your mama wants to fuck you!*” And the whole table of people was shaken/in shock hahaha...and were like, “Don’t get mad, boss, hey, let’s call it a day. Let’s go!” Then everybody left...they thought I’d often be overbearing and didn’t care how others would think. I said, “*Why don’t I protect myself? ...if you wanna me to drink, and you are a man, then you drink, too. Why you have to bully/harass me just because I am a woman?*”...So my friends now just treat me as a brother, although I often dress up all seductive; I am pretty much a man to my heart, haha! You’ve got to protect yourself before you can get the rest of the business done.

To paraphrase this rather long account, Quan was pushed to drink by a male colleague who also harassed her (through unwanted touching). To protect herself perhaps when harassment in business socializing was normalized, she had to shatter the politeness norms. I considered this account an example of playful struggle because, for one, she told this story in a highly comedic, unrestrained style, featuring constant laughter from both the teller and the listeners (me and a close friend of hers). For another, her identity enactment/performance within the event was also informal, unique, and highly dynamic (in terms of tones and specific words used). In this dramatized scene, Quan recreated in colorful language the tension between male bodies and sexualized female bodies in a situation where the alcohol culture in one of its ugliest forms was again instantiated.

As previously noted, the common socializing practice in the form of business meals, often involving excessive drinking, was a tradition against which all participants spoke but to which they had to comply to varying extents, just to be able to survive in business. Regardless, drinking while attending business meals could create a situation where all participants would feel awkward, anxious, uncomfortable, disgusted, and threatened. In the preceding case, facing the happening sexual harassment activated by the discourse that sexualizes women's presence in business, Quan took the stance of a *xia* to literally immobilize the offender's action by becoming increasingly unrestrained from social norms (e.g., taking off her professional clothes, revealing her tattoos, posturing aggressively) and subverting femininity and masculinity. A series of unusual actions then crescendoed into her emancipatory utterances of profanity, by which she completely destroyed all the facework being maintained there, creating a shocking situation. Through this enactment of the *xia* device, she came out of this struggle in a precarious victory ("I

was really trying to hold myself up”). It is worth noting that she rejected victim-blaming and deemed women’s choice of clothing “none of your damn business,” still taking a *xia* stance.

5.4 Polemic-Transformative Struggle

Participants’ narratives also elucidated the polemic-transformative struggle as a feature of the synchronic interplay between competing discourses. Examining this dimension, researchers explore the possibilities of moving “from a zero-sum logic, in which competing discourses are jockeying for center-margin positioning, to a profound realignment of discourses in which new meanings are created,” activating a transformation (Baxter, 2011, p. 138). In addition, according to Baxter (2011) and Bakhtin (1986), all previous dimensions themselves are features of polemic struggles, as meaningful mergers of different perspectives are not achieved while struggles remain active. That is, all findings thus far exemplified polemic struggles. Therefore, in this section, I mainly focus on cases and processes in participants’ narratives where they arrived at a transformation.

5.4.1 Balance

Although the polemic struggle is fleshed out in discussions of previous dimensions, the present study provided a good opportunity for further examining the pattern of balance discussed in Baxter (2011). Balance, based on pre-RDT2.0 studies (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), is a state of truce between competing discourses where they reached some delicate agreement through compromising actions of different parties. Balance or compromising, however, was not included as a lexical marker guiding contrapuntal analysis, which perhaps explains why this pattern has been ignored by new RDT studies. Granted, entertaining is a pattern where multiple discourses co-exist. However, balance/compromising, according to Baxter’s (2011) description and the idea of compromising itself, differs from entertaining regarding the force of each identifiable discourse. That is, in entertaining, multiple discourses seem to be in their full force,

whereas, in balance, the force of each discourse is reduced to give some room to their competitors, thereby maintaining a careful balance. In a literal sense, in the present study, a balance pattern could be illuminated by participants' discussions and accounts of two senses of balance relevant to the current context, including work-family balance and female-male balance. I follow the reporting pattern I have established thus far by also specifying the discursive move or practice through which a balance relationship between competing discourses is made present by participants, and compromising offers a perfect term for their actions.

5.4.1.1 Compromising

On the first level, compromising was a common discursive practice in participants' accounts about work-family balance, when balance they understood was much in the polemic double-bind, do-it-all, and do not upset the patriarchy sense. This balance was derived from the clash between "traditional" expectations (reflecting misalignment) in which women fulfilling conventional gender roles and norms (e.g., being obedient) was stressed, and "progressive" gender discourses and expectations belonging in the "new eras" became evident. In the new eras, women *became* independent and critical to social production (e.g., "half the sky"). In fact, in the section answering RQ1, I categorized narratives reflecting this balance into the dominant discourse inhibiting women entrepreneurs' meaningful integration of their gender and work and other intersecting identities. Specifically, this balance was captured by the idea of "master both *wai* and *nei*/又主外又主内" mentioned earlier, specifically critiqued by a few participants (i.e., Cuiwei, Congrong) and, what I want to demonstrate below, a practice of "identity shift" (Dickens & Chavez, 2018) featuring compromising with regard to specific ways of performing identities at home. This "at home" alludes to the idea of zoning/regionalization of identities. As

one example, I consider what Tianjing shared when she reflected about her ways of maintaining “family harmony,” used interchangeably with the “work-family balance” in interviews:

The second aspect (the first was about material contribution) is that he’s in charge at home while I’m not. I dumb myself down in front of them (her husband and mother-in-law), meaning I use all my cunningness, determination, and what others said, “dominance,” etcetera all in my career, but I never bring them home. Maybe I’m taking advantage of the fact that I’m good at changing faces...meaning shifting [and] controlling my feelings/emotions. [At home] I’m totally a little woman. My mother-in-law and my husband are the heads/masters/leaders. I never ask about how things are done, like giving favors to others (to maintain relationships) and purchasing things. The most I do is giving some suggestions, and I never make decisions or tell them what they must do, [never demonstrating] dominance or other aspects at work at home...I appear weak (示弱) when I’m with my kid, too...

One context was important for understanding why I considered it to be compromising. In her family, it was indeed her husband who spent more time to be the caretaker, which in an ideal world would not be a special thing; however, by the current gender order, this arrangement was, as she said herself, “very rare!” In this comment, she was critical about the “traditional culture.” She also considered career women (especially as the owner of a profiting business) as being able to benefit the family more by bringing in material resources. In addition, about mothering, she explicitly aligned with integration discourse, considering career mothers were more effective for being great role models. In this context, she drew on the DOI to make meaning of her family harmony. In the preceding utterances, however, her professional woman identity was even denied entry to her family (a specific zone/region), at least in a context she made present. She was compromising by only performing a specific form of womanhood (“little woman”) at home characterized by remaining obedient and submissive while suppressing other important professional “faces” (e.g., cunningness, determination) of herself. These faces were indeed critical to her entrepreneurial identity, about which she felt proud (judging by other stories she told, such as being recognized as a successful woman entrepreneur in her hometown). Though I

remained suspicious about whether she truly needed to be “totally a little woman” at home, in this rhetorical event itself, she activated a balance positioning of the discourses of misalignment and integration, where women being professional, resourceful entrepreneurs were great to the family so long as it would not upset patriarchy (at home). Many women indeed resonated with this idea of balance, entailing that women, despite being resourceful entrepreneurs and powerful leaders, shift to the obedient, tender “little woman” or “good mother and good wife,” readily participate in *xiang fu jiao zi*, and maintain the order of “Men being the sky; women being the earth.” Despite, many of their actual arrangement at home might demonstrate more nuances if not otherwise.

Compromising was also evident in another sense. Framed by gender dualism, compromising femininity in professional arenas was normed male and masculine, thereby not upsetting the status quo. Some participants framed this practice as *yin-yang* and/or male-female balance in the workplace. Mengting stated:

Indeed the process of growing along with the enterprise is also one through which [you?] start weakening your own gender...there are two disadvantaged/marginalized groups: first, young people [for being inexperienced], and second, women...women [are disadvantaged] because of stereotypes. This society has labels for women. So, if you don't obscure your own gender, you will not only be stuck in but also reinforce these labels and eventually get nothing done...for example, when we just started entrepreneurship, and I was 20 something, so I belonged in two disadvantaged groups... You will be treated as one of the weak and either get bullied or protected and offered convenience...[But] don't you think this is normal. You need to sensitively construct/create yourself, like for example...girls have the instinct to act spoiled or show weakness because they earn you social affirmation/approval [from] men or people who are older than you...so you must control your desire to show weakness while communicating with people objectively as equals...

She proceeded to associate “women/girls” as a whole (including herself) with being “subjective,” “emotional,” and “impulsive,” which are not considered by her as suitable for entrepreneurship and management. She also categorized her women members into the rational and emotional

kinds while considering the former's "subjective, impulsive, and emotional instincts of women" as weakened by "some level of" inborn rationality. Eventually, she concluded that managerial women need to "weaken" "women's weak point" of being "emotional" and "subjective" while intentionally *becoming* rational and objective through "cultivation." She started by critically orienting to gendered "stereotypes" and "labels," which, however, quickly turned attributable to women and essential femininity the moment she said, "So if you don't obscure your own gender...." Drawing on several dualisms (i.e., gender, gendered traits/qualities) and the masculine norms in management and organizing, Mengting enacted the misalignment discourse (especially femininity unsettles entrepreneurship) throughout the rather long account, turning women and femininity (essentially associated) foreign and upsetting in male-gendered professional settings. In an interview where she highlighted the importance of women maintaining a professional life and participating in "fair competition" (aligning with DOI), Mengting paradoxically enacted an unfavored positioning of women and femininity (DOM). Within such a paradox, she turned to compromise femininity (i.e., "obscure" and "weaken" the woman gender).

This paradoxical practice was enacted by many participants who chose to, for example, "ignore" their gender or "not treat yourself as a woman too much or not treat yourself as a woman" (Hanchun) at work. This finding is not at all new, echoing existing studies on professional women's experiences in Western contexts (e.g., Hatmaker, 2013; Jorgenson, 2002; Verge & Pastor, 2018; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015). It is again affirming that understanding gender from existing dualisms and enacting gender identities (and other gendered identities) creates an entrapment where women and femininity are still rendered secondary and the Other in masculine organizing (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020; Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017;). Fascinatingly, however,

Mengting and some other participants' talk about "becoming" and "cultivating" certain (masculine) qualities at work in women bodies would indeed arrive at a transformed position (discussed in section 4.2.1).

5.4.2 Hybrid

The hybrid pattern has been one that fascinated most RDT researchers, as it is a positioning of competing discourses where meaningful integration and transformation starts, moving beyond a competing, zero-sum logic to give rise to meanings rendered anew. Indeed, as I demonstrated in section 4.2, integration or transformation seems to be an orientation toward which the discursive struggles being investigated here are looking, as participants have shared ways in which femininity and women bodies are being integrated into currently male-dominated entrepreneurship, *through women's agentic efforts*. Balance regarding the male-female as well as the work-family relations was still a central theme in the process of transformation. Differing from the "balance" featuring the practice of compromise discussed above, the balance in a hybrid positioning of discourses was one characterized by flexibility, mutual-complement (of categories), and possibilities, and, as Jingjing stated in section 4.2.2, a dynamic one.

5.4.2.1 Complementing

I use complementing here to capture the move taken by participants to enact a hybrid pattern (in both the interviews and interaction made present in the interviews). "Mutual complement/互补" is indeed an ideal relation between different dichotomized categories in Chinese philosophies, including *yin-yang* forces and the associated femininity-masculinity categories and the spaces of *nei*/inside and *wai*/outside. Indeed, Rosenlee (2006) deemed the complementary relation between *nei-wai* as what distinguished this dichotomy from the divide of

private-public spheres in the Western family institution. This complementary logic underlies many examples in section 4.2.

Regarding the work-family balance, for example, participants presented a new balance entailing, first, a reinterpretation of family roles and role-related responsibilities resulting from negotiation among family members. Revisiting Hanchun's enactment of a "new housewife" identity, her own, and likely her family members', understanding of a "complete housewife" had already been a transformed one who was but one member (instead of *the* one) participating in maintaining family harmony and who negotiates with other members to foster a consensus or shared family meaning, enabled by her managerial skills learned from work. The hybrid positioning of discourses was manifested in the new housewife identity as a meaningful merger of conventional gender role expectations and woman entrepreneur (in a managerial position) identification. The practice of complementing was also illuminated in accounts where participants considered how women practicing entrepreneurship not only brought in material resources but also enabled effective management of relationships and communication at home through which a shared reality could be constructed (e.g., Congrong). Furthermore, the hybrid pattern and the complementing practice were further fleshed out in how participants enacted motherhood in 4.2.3. For example, focusing on long-term impact and goals, women entrepreneurs' professional life transformed from what prevented them from fulfilling mother roles to what enabled them to be ideal role models, who also knew how to creatively mobilize resources when participating in child-rearing. On another level, the mother identity, instead of being seen as a distraction to work, became an enabler for participants' construction of organizational identity and emotional connection with their creations.

Yun further enacted a hybrid position by emphasizing women and femininity as forces already entailed in the maintenance of a reality and by emphasizing how women's increased participation in social production indeed also create possibilities for men:

I remember an author has said, "If the world was absent of women, it would lose 70% of its truth, 80% of kindness, and 90% of beauty." I think when dealing with issues, it's not necessary whether women or men are better or worse [than each other]. I think a balance and a complementary relation are achievable, and this complementary relation will make the entire society more harmonious and beautiful... And we've seen how feudal patriarchy [created harms?]... in fact, women's participation [in social production] is good for men, too, enabling a part of men by giving them more choice... because indeed Chinese men do not have enough approaches to de-stress, so not enough! Women's participation [in more sectors] would enable more men to experience different walks of life. It's not that only women can be in some areas, which is better for their body-mind development, instead of forcing a part of men into a corner, too... today's society should learn more from feminine things.

The hybridity shown in these utterances was noticeable as she, on the one hand, noted the current unbalanced participation of Chinese men and women in different sectors of social production (this was also established in other parts of her interview), and on another, considered the critical nature of women and femininity (counting "truth, kindness, and beauty" albeit in an essentialist sense) in reality construction. A hybrid pattern immediately emerged as she integrated the contradictory women being essential to the world and women not equally participating in social production by envisioning how, by achieving a "complementary relation," both men and women would benefit from such a balance. The balance could even move beyond many established work-gender associations based on gender dualism to enable possibilities. This view also found resonance in other participants' narratives where they considered femininity as an enriching force to entrepreneurship and overall women entrepreneurs as change agents. In short, complementing enacted in this section emphasizes an ongoing negotiation between/among differently positioned discourses, instead of one yielding to the other, through which possibilities remain alive in discursive expansiveness.

5.4.2.2 Queering

Enactment of a hybrid positioning also occurred as participants, in a few interviews and the focus group, highlighted and claimed *both femininity and masculinity*. This positioning stands out from other ways how participants framed the relationship between binary gender identities and entrepreneurship, such as: maintaining essentialist unique strengths discourse (e.g., women are better at coordinating relationships vs. men are better at logic); troubling de-gendering approaches (e.g., not considering gender differences but associating femininity with weakness); and disclaiming stereotypical feminine and/or masculine traits approach (e.g., disassociating from female fragility and/or male aggressiveness). In this section, although not moving very far from gender dualism, a hybrid identifying with *both femininity and masculinity* stance emerged, *moving toward* (not so smoothly) a gender performativity view that sees gender identities as situational and relational (i.e., constrained and enabled by different agents) enactment. This tendency enabled a queering potential and effectively untied masculinity from the category of men while femininity from women (Sedgwick, 1993), if “to make things queer is to disturb the order of things” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 161, see also Berry, 2013). It was a potential, not full-fledged, queering practice because of the infrequent occurrence, compared to all other themes; nevertheless, it was an intentional move of mine to deploy a queer lens analytically on these narratives to foreground this emanated potential that could accumulate to larger transformation in how professional identities are understood (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018). One uniqueness to note was that the queering move was enabled by specific idioms reflecting Taoist ideations on the relation and movement of gendered *yin-yang* and softness-toughness dualisms, which are themselves gendered (associated with gender and sex), as foreshadowed and explained

in 4.2.1, including 阴阳平衡 (*yin-yang* balance), 刚柔并济 (coupling softness and toughness), and 以柔克刚 (overcome toughness with softness).

Consider the following brief response in the focus group. One participant, Xia, brought up the difference between male entrepreneurs' direct, hard command and women entrepreneurs' more gentle communication with employees and teams characterized by empathy and understanding. Later, Ruoyun responded to this specific point by saying,

I think one advantage women have over men [is that] compared to men, Xia just talked about men's toughness and women's tenderness/softness, but indeed often women--I believe every entrepreneur here we, in our positions, all have the boldness that men are supposed to have or lethality [if I exaggerate a bit, and] yeah, [we] have a sort of boldness and authority.

This specific framing immediately elicited excited responses and laughter from other participants. Two (Baixin, Ruxi) laughed out aloud and said they were “*nv han zi*” (“female + dude/man”). Xia responded by saying women were more flexible. Ruoyun continued,

Right, but she can be softer than men, maybe it's easier for her to reach employees' heart...only through this [mindful] way can employees submit to the company and be loyal to the company, which I think is an advantage for women.

In this exchange, group discussions about women entrepreneurs elicited the ideas of toughness-softness in their talk. Whereas Xia drew on the classic male toughness and female softness dichotomization to foreground women's “soft” strengths, Ruoyun pushed the discussion further by claiming both of them, situated at work (“in our positions”). This framing reflected/enacted a hybrid pattern, moving *a little* away from the unproductive debate over what and whether gender traits/qualities fit managerial contexts, to activate a “flexible” body that could embody both masculinity and femininity (compared to, for example, downplaying femininity to fit in). This practice even invited the humorous identification of “*nv han zi*,” a hybrid term embracing paradoxical gendering (female + dude/man) that appeared a few years ago in Chinese public

discourse (e.g., online posts), which *could be* used in self-empowering ways by women to claim certain strengths stereotypically associated with men. In this fleeting moment, although stilled perpetuating dualisms (e.g., toughness was what men have while softness was still only associated with women), participants also unintentionally decoupled toughness/masculinity from men. Additionally, the move of claiming both toughness and softness was indeed enabled by an idiom that occurred in two other interviews, 刚柔并济 (couple hardness with softness), in which toughness and softness were forces that could be simultaneously wielded by one body.

A more explicit queering move, captured by the phrase “雌雄同体” (femaleness and maleness in one body), indeed forms the basis of Mengting’s discussion of an ideal entrepreneur. While all other participants either deemed “entrepreneur” male or were critically aware that the “role” was made male through recursive social practices (and sometimes both/and), Mengting was the only one who moved to queer the gender identity *of* an entrepreneur (i.e., the identity of work, Ashcraft, 2013), from a male-gendering into a hybrid body hosting both “雌/femaleness” and “雄/maleness”:

As entrepreneurs, regardless of men or women...A point I quite agree with is that people cultivate [themselves] to level up, and the highest level of human cultivation is *ci xiong tong ti*/雌雄同体 (having both male and female sexes in one body). Meaning, as a man, you need to possess some features of women, whereas as a woman, you need to possess some features of men...The higher the level of your cultivation, the more you obscure your gender.

This statement occurred at the very beginning of her interview, where she responded to the questions about how she understood the idea of “entrepreneur.” Immediately in this opening, she set up a queer frame, also stating that “in the workplace, professionals, let alone entrepreneurs are basically “gender-ambiguous”...for survival and development.” By stating gender as “cultivation,” she also took a constructivist approach (i.e., she does not consider gender as

biologically given). However, she soon turned to gender dualism and accounts for essential feminine traits of women (i.e., emotional, impulsive, irrational) that were hindrances to the fulfillment of, for example, managerial responsibilities, as shown in a previous example. From criticizing women and femininity, she turned to consider several strengths (e.g., loyalty, resilience, self-sacrifice) of women suited for surviving the workplace and the overall challenging process of entrepreneurship:

Men may be stronger, but women may be more resilient. Women may be prone to be more perceptive—more sensitive—to life and humanity. Her emotions are richer, [which] enable her to ease up more easily, and she would cancel out...negative things imposed on [her], whether if it's in the entrepreneurial process...For example, having come a long way, you've experienced a lot of things and blows, and even betrayals and hurts, but you still are full of ardor for life and society...this is another power of yours, a soft/flexible/elastic power...women, relatively speaking, have these things by nature. But as a male entrepreneur, you still need to let yourself cultivate these things, don't you? So, I think entrepreneurship should be coupling toughness and softness, which goes back to my point at the beginning to be is *ci xiong tong ti*/femaleness and maleness in one body.

In this excerpt, she was again shifting from seeing gender as essential traits to seeing gender as cultivatable, a both-nature-and-nurture possibility, which might be enabled by a discursively expansive stance she took marked by her use of “may.” At the interview, right when she brought up *ci xiong tong ti*/雌雄同体 (femaleness and maleness in one body), I was excited to hear a transformed and transgressive view on the gender of entrepreneur, only to get slightly disappointed as she soon took femininity as the problem approach. Yet upon a second examination of the transcribed interview, I realized that by femaleness and maleness in one body, the ideal image of an entrepreneur she presented was one where strengths associated with stereotypical masculinity and femininity merged, towards which not only women but also men should orient by “cultivation” through what she called “obscuring gender.” In the preceding excerpt, male entrepreneurs should also cultivate strengths associated with femininity. She further explained that “obscuring gender” as a woman is “not turning myself into a man, but

rather weakening the weaknesses in my female instinct that are not suited for managers and entrepreneurs, while giving full play to [what are suited]. It's in fact the same for men." In this framing, "female instinct" was turned flexible and changeable, so was what was male. Overall, *ci xiong tong ti* was a hybrid ideal body of an entrepreneur, stemming from but moving beyond gender and sex dualisms, perhaps inviting queer performances (e.g., men enacting femininity).

In the last case, one participant, Dinchun, talked herself into a queer identification by reflecting on the gender roles of women entrepreneurs. After sharing her understanding of how entrepreneurs are playing "reversed gender roles" (see 4.1.1), she had an epiphanic alignment—as she said excitedly, "Wow, this synonym I came up//I just had this ah-ha moment as we were talking about this!"—with a specific famous transgender woman in China enabled by her sudden realization that women entrepreneurs might be perceived as "transgender" in China:

...even entrepreneurship should be male-dominated, while women are followers...however, if a woman becomes the leader, right, the role is reverse...how would others see this [reversed role]?...This synonym may not necessarily be appropriate, but indeed you need to become a transgender person!...although you are not physiologically transgender or in terms of your appearance, you are a transgender person regarding your social roles! Regarding social roles, maybe this group (women entrepreneurs) are transgender people and are not acknowledged. What's agreed on is that you are a follower and a woman, as roles, isn't it? But you need to challenge what's dominant, so you need to become a man regarding social roles...maybe you are still a woman in terms of appearance and everything...how you see a transgender person in life may, to some extent, be similar to how you see a woman leader in an enterprise!

Although the "you need to become a man" utterance could be seen as perpetuating male gendering of entrepreneurship, I considered her understanding as transformative for a few reasons. First, in her accounts, binary gender categories were clearly associated with performed roles instead of essential traits/qualities (compared to utterance such as, "My personality is more like a man because I am so and so"), which were open to subversion ("reversion/颠倒") and challenge. To her, then, performing the male-gendered entrepreneurial leadership role ("become

a man”) in a woman’s body served to subvert the norms (“what’s dominant”), leading to her excited identification with “transgender,” at least in a professional setting. Nonetheless, it was still a queering move. She further proceeded to construct an alignment between the strengths and agentic choice of a transwoman celebrity in China and that of women running enterprises:

Do you truly, from you’re the bottom of your heart, accept trans people? I think maybe many people won’t [though better-educated people were taught not to insult them and may try to understand them]... For example, we have a Jinxin Show in China. She’s already doing great. Jinxin transitioned from a male to a female, didn’t she? I actually think she’s very smart and [brilliant], but I think many people still can’t 100% accept [her] from the traditional Chinese psychological perspectives... indeed [women] entrepreneurs may face similar dangers... a woman entrepreneur, no matter how great is your achievement, but in a patriarchal society, will men, including women, accept you 100%? I think not, honestly. Maybe the best is that they accept you on a surface level...they may admire you like how many people admire Jinxin for daring to speak up, living as herself, and leading a brilliant life, but do you truly completely...accept? The power of Chinese traditional cultures is immense and deeply entrenched...don’t you try to change [traditions], but now that you’ve chosen certain paths...you’ve got to live on...like Jinxin, did she stop living [because] so many people were criticizing/insulting her...she must live and she lives brilliantly, doesn’t she? So now that you chose the entrepreneurial path...you’ve got to live...selectively listen more to [benign] suggestions while ignoring [malign, negative] energies...like a sunflower seeking sunlight [and] positive energies.

Here, although I could not tell whether she personally “completely accept[s]” transgender, her discursive practice of making present the body of a transwoman, who exists precariously, to make meanings of the contested identities of women entrepreneurs further materialized the queering of women entrepreneurs. This queering was also a self-empowering move as she drew on Jinxin’s “daring to speak up, living as herself, and leading a brilliant life” (identifications) despite not being accepted in cultural traditions, to emphasizing women entrepreneurs’—also defying traditions—survival and thriving (“live brilliantly”). One thing that must be noted here is that she failed to consider the dysphoria that trans people typically experience, which was unlikely that a cisgender woman (entrepreneur) would be able to experience and understand. In

Dingchun's sensemaking, it was women entrepreneurs who became queer bodies subverting masculine norms.

It is worth mentioning that supportive discussions about the gay, lesbian, and transgender (e.g., "the third gender" by Congrong) communities emerged in some participants in parts where they talked about the world becoming more open-minded about gender identities, relationships, and family, without me disclosing my gay identity.

5.5 Voiced-Enacted Struggle

Imagine conducting a study on voices and utterances in the discursive construction of meanings but being told by at least over half of your participants (at least 18) that "it's pointless to talk/speak, not even the slightest" (Dinchun) or "you could not speak [up]" (Shanglan) or "the more I explained, the messier it got, so I stopped explaining" (Congfei).

As explicated at the beginning of 4.3, in many cases, facing the normalized dominance of masculinity and male bodies, participants in their women bodies learned from experience that talking, if even allowed, might not work or be productive most of the time. However, struggles between discourses and dialogue between parties still took place in silent modes through acts, through which some sort of meaningful relational consequences would arrive. In this section, I provide evidence for the proposed new voiced-enacted dimension/feature of the synchronous interplay in RDT. This dimension considers discursive-materiality and Cooren's (2020) recent theorization of discourse (i.e., what is considered symbolic) necessarily materializing in different degrees, or materiality is a matter of degree, depending on bodies constituting the presence. This idea indeed finds resonance in RDT, regarding its considerations of "speaking as a concrete and embodied act...performed in unique time and space" as well as "the dialogic boundary of the said and the unsaid" regarding speech community or the immediate situation shared (or not) by speakers (p. 30). That is, RDT suggests similarly that (1) speaking concretizes, performed by a

time-space situated bodies; (2) situation speaks, inexplicitly, through the embodied relations of speech community members.

More specifically about identity construction, in structuration, structure, necessarily discursive entailing meanings, is instantiated in recursive social practices, located in a time-space presence (i.e., materiality). From this perspective, identity is made present, entailing how it is understood, through situated activity/practices that are enactment enabled and constrained by contexts (i.e., identification) and stabilizes (or changes) as activities became recursive (Scott et al., 1998). The discursive practice of enacting identity should also have different degrees of materialization, depending on what constitutes the locale in which it is situated. Therefore, perhaps in locales/contexts/speech communities normed masculine and gendered male, the more acted form of intelligibility (i.e., practical intelligibility) takes precedence and more carefully acted efforts (to make matter) become necessary when alternative meanings (e.g., women practicing entrepreneurship) do not have enough available bodies on which their presence rely to materialize.

In this section, I present several such cases where participants had to act to speak, thereby *creating* a higher degree of materiality for their entrepreneurship in dialogue with different levels of communities in which they were not readily meaningful bodies in certain positions, as the awkward *woman* entrepreneur or women conducting business in different organizational contexts. Although the situations of these experiences varied by specific ways in how bodies making these situations manifest were categorized (e.g., by era, industry), the *enacted discursive* practice that each participant (as a body of the situation) took at the time of an event was similar.

A few participants belonging to the older generations (e.g., Post-50s, Post-60s) that pioneered China's venture into the market (and the opening up of the private sector) had

experienced the afterglow of China's state-owned enterprises (and institutions) in their monopolistic glory. Women, however, were not given many opportunities or considerations for promotion in these powerful organizations, at least in those where participants served varied roles in business. For example, Weimin said proudly with a trace of struggle in her voice:

I was the first female manager ever of the entire [institution] for how many years! I myself was "advanced" (referring to performance evaluation) every year, *every year!* And a lot of my businesses slowly [accumulated?]. For how many decades, there was no female manager in [the trading institution]!

She continued to account how she, in a "male-dominated unit," was questioned by male colleagues who had never seen a female manager (e.g., "what's so special about you, woman? Aren't you just a statistician? Why did you get to be promoted? So you studied for two years [at a college]"). When I asked how she would respond to them, she said, "No, it'd be useless to argue with them. You must prove yourself, you know, to be persuasive." By proving yourself, she meant completing challenging tasks for the institution and maintaining the "advanced" evaluation every year. In a male-dominated environment, she participated in the discursive struggle by enactment (persuading others through actions) of ideal work identities.

In a similar story, Shanglan told candidly and in detail that "you couldn't speak out" as a woman member. Nevertheless, she, too, through enactment, achieved meaningful transformations regarding how others saw her and, more importantly in this story, how she saw herself. She was in an environment where women were considered less capable than men and were not "at all" considered for promotion:

For my abilities, maybe if you had promoted me to a leadership position in sales, I would have been doing well, but...*no one had even considered you at all!* All the posts in all those departments, like Section Chief, Department Director, and Manager, were *all* male comrades', not even a single one set for female comrades. [No one] considered, "Well these women comrades are not bad at all. Maybe they should be given a try." Never had anyone thought [about that].

In this description, the context (in both senses) screamed male dominance, comprised of relations in which only men took the centralized leading positions in every rank and section. She, among a few “female comrades,” had little to no opportunities situated in a space made of male bodies.

The DOM manifested in both proximal (interacting with all those men) and distal sites (the larger institutional environment) of meanings. Further, she explicated how, as a woman, voicing to advocate for herself was impossible in such an environment:

In fact, I thought I was qualified [that is, that my] abilities were quite okay...*but I couldn't say anything, could I! Leaders never considered me!* There was a deputy division director in our company... His degree wasn't even as high as mine (in the past system, many posts were assigned by earned degrees), but he got to be a deputy division director while *I wasn't even considered for a section chief by nobody!* But you couldn't talk about this thing, *nope, you couldn't haha!*...even if you knew in your heart, you really couldn't speak out, *you could not speak out, could you!* Well, you couldn't say, “Hmm, my abilities are stronger than him!” You couldn't say any of these, you know? The idea that state-owned enterprises were unfair to women comrades was something you just couldn't speak out.

This excerpt was filled with the repeated “you couldn't speak out,” stated emotionally (her tone sounded simultaneously urgent, annoyed, and amused. She would either raise her voice or suppress it and her utterances were filled with expressions like “ah,” “oh,” “my god”). The DOM further materialized before her through various agents, including the unfairly placed male colleague and their degrees. Such an environment that spoke male dominance (and female inferiority) might resemble that of a single-voiced monologue conceptualized by Bakhtin (1986), where alternative voices—here women's voices—did not exist and possibilities were closed, which was made clear by Shanglan. Nevertheless, it might not be truly in the sense of a monologue (e.g., single voice meaning system), as she could still express her unspoken “I am qualified” through enactment.

I was able to keep my mind open. I said, “If I could be a leader, I'd do it; if I couldn't, it wouldn't matter either. I just do my part, no matter what, and that's good enough.” Because every leader of ours indeed was approving of my abilities, [saying], “[nickname] is a reliable person who can do things.”...back then, as a salesperson, you were in charge

of [the business in] two provinces, which was stressful. You had to collect payments for sold products by yourself. When I left, I cleared up all payments and didn't leave any "sequela" for my successor...it didn't matter that I couldn't be a leader, as long as my abilities were acknowledged by my colleagues and superiors.

Therefore, although she could not be outspoken about her abilities, she still actively constructed a trusting relationship between the leaders and herself by doing, locally creating an alternative to the overall lack of acknowledgment to women. This trust awarded her more than verbal affirmation. Later, recognized for her reliability and efforts, she was invited by her manager to join a young team that established a subsidiary, where she became part of the management and could practice her skills and talents. As the story unfolded, she would discover an opportunity in this subsidiary when one time she found out their supply (of a chemical product) could not satisfy the market demand, after which she proceeded to start and be in charge of a new line of trading when even her managers dared not to (due to the complications in a state-owned enterprise). She completed the trade with success, and on that day,

I could see the ten tank wagons belonged to me on [or parked on] the track...I said, "Hey, I guess I am pretty successful!"...I just thought, hey, I proved to myself that my ability to make money is not inferior to men (in a laughing tone). So, a seed was planted in my mind...wouldn't it be nice if the 10 wagons were doing business for my own company? That was my "original motivation."

In this heartwarming ending (or beginning) of her story, she also arrived at an empowering personal transformation, in which action was still the highlight. In her accounts, only male bodies in positions of power were the ones who could utter, whereas her words only occurred as internal monologues. However, she could still participate in the interplay of meaning (re)production, thereby voicing in dialogue through the enactment of her professional identity, whereby she materialized a reliable self for her colleagues and latter an entrepreneurial identity—further materialized by her successful trade and the 10 wagons—for herself.

Overwhelming voices perpetuating the misalignment discourse could also be industry-specific. Despite being a major force in the sports industry, Bing's mere turning up would often surprise people:

Like nowadays whenever I turned up in some collaborative or big events, especially in an industry like sports...when I turned up, because you don't even look like somebody who does sports simply judging by your stature, and then you don't even look like an athlete in the first place. Secondly, sports managers were mostly those men, powerful and representing strength. "How come such a frail woman showed up?" It's quite an impact.

In these events, Bing's physical body was deemed unfit not only for a type of work (Ashcraft, 2013) but also for an entire industry only associated with stereotypical masculinity. Her turning up became a trigger of the unsettlement previously discussed. However, the focus here was how discourses made present by Bing interplayed in unspoken ways:

They [collaborator] would hold suspicions [based on my appearance] ... which is obvious in this industry. Like it was like this when we collaborated with [an American company]. It was not until we had collaborated for a while had he changed his perception of you until he realized that what you completed, the support you provided, and your power may be exceeded the support that many men had given him...*you saying something would be useless. It depended more on doing!*

Here, she specifically highlighted that meaningful transformation was made only possible by doing, when even her body was deemed unfit for an entire industry. She further gave an example of such a transformation:

There are *too many* [examples]! Like [at a major socializing event during a national event] a team of some regional government officials was dismissive toward [me], thinking you were a woman and also [the owner of] a private enterprise (the tension between state agencies and private businesses). At the dinner party, I went to propose a toast (a way to show respect and exchange politeness), but they said, "We don't drink this liquor of yours, 'you go your broad road; I walk my narrow bridge' (你走你的阳关道, 我走我的独木桥, expressing disassociation)" However, through the process of us doing it, he realized that this woman, compared to those men in state-owned enterprises, could offer [him] more support, follow the rules better, was more loyal, and could solve more problems. So, after the [major event], we are now really good friends...he now thinks nothing goes wrong as long as she does it. His trust for you has moved from one end to another.

In this account, Bing established tangled competing positions to be transformed. The tensions might have located in tensions regarding (1) the legitimacy of a women-owned enterprise; (2) the conflict of interests between the “public-owned” state institutions and private-owned enterprises (that are agents of capitalism). Sometimes, public and private collaborations might result in corruption and bribery. The struggling negotiation between agents of the state and masculinity and Bing, who embodied femininity and the private economy, started awkwardly with the former bluntly rejecting the latter (a discursive closure). The expression/adage was a classic one that suggested disassociation and separation. However, through “the process of doing it,” the differently positioned discourses associated with different bodies were put in dialogue in enacted ways. Likely, through providing support, following regulations, and solving problems, Bing helped transform the relationship meaning between herself and the government official and that between the organizations they represented. Additionally, one interesting point Bing mentioned was that

Now that you want to accomplish things, especially leading an enterprise, you must do your best not to listen to those noises. You do not consider them, and then be yourself (in Chinese, it was indeed “do yourself”). Only in this way can you move ahead.

In this case, her enactment of entrepreneurial identity also entailed negating competing “noises” while keeping doing what confirmed her identities.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Previously at the end of Chapter 2, I asked these two literature-informed research questions: (1) What and where do competing discourses activate the meaning of “woman entrepreneur” as Chinese women entrepreneurs talk about their working lives? (2) In what ways do competing discourses engage in interplay, and how do women entrepreneurs move/act through the interplay of discourses? Enabled by a framework built upon RDT and SMI that also considered feminist new materialism, I answered my two research questions. Specifically, in Chapter 4, to answer RQ1, I identified two overarching discourses/themes, including (1) Discourse of misalignment, women entrepreneurs as misplaced bodies (DOM), and (2) discourse of integration, women entrepreneurs as agents of change and possibilities (DOI). These two discourses, each made of five sub-discourses, shed light upon the dialectics or the mutually implicating and interdependent opposites poles engaging in the push-pull interplay (Putnam et al., 2016) that activated (and are activated by) the relational lives of Chinese women entrepreneurs within different contexts (e.g., mainly, work, family life). In this project, DOM was the pole around which Chinese women’s presence in the entrepreneurial world was *made to be* secondary, lesser, and even unintelligible under the current masculine gender order, whereas DOI presented the other end where Chinese women entrepreneurs, through performativity, rendered their contested identities meaningful and possible. I expound on these findings in 6.1. Chapter 5 answered RQ 2, in which I, sensitized by existing dimensions in RDT, identified: (1) evidence supporting existing patterns and/or functions (e.g., regarding ambiguity) of discursive struggle, many of which have not yet explored in extant RDT studies (e.g., devices of

seriousness or playfulness); (2) a whole new layer of nuanced practices interactants perform when under certain patterns of discursive struggle; (3) a new voiced-enacted dimension to discursive struggle theorized in RDT that intended to expand what can be considered an utterance.

These findings contribute to multiple veins of scholarship. I now summarize my contributions before further expounding upon them by revisiting findings. To begin with, my contribution to RDT is evident. Besides the new patterns and a new dimension that I just reviewed, this study also extends RDT 2.0 contextually, both in terms of the linguistic system and the sociocultural context. New waves of studies based on RDT (Baxter, 2011) have mainly demonstrated its richness and usefulness in English-speaking, Anglo-American cultural contexts (for an exception, see Dutta, 2017). My study extends RDT's application and cultural relevance by fully engaging it with narrative data based on accounts and reflections of women who live in mainland China and primarily speak Chinese. In addition, with my focus on the situated action (i.e., the contextuality) as participants negotiated the meanings and boundaries of their gendered work-family identities, I specifically responded to Suter's (2018) call for studies that practice both intersectional analysis and contrapuntal analysis. In a similar vein, I also contribute to critical family and interpersonal communication studies and specifically in non-Western and non-White contexts, a goal identified by interpersonal communication scholars who have been pushing a critical turn (e.g., Moore & Manning, 2019; Suter, 2016).

Next, I contribute to the underexplored Chinese women's entrepreneurial experience (Alon et al., 2011; Long, 2015; Welsh et al., 2017), enriching the current White-, Western-centric understanding in entrepreneurial studies (Brush et al., 2019; Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Inman, 2016; Knight, 2016). My focus on the discursive construction of the meanings (necessarily

matter) also joins forces with researchers who have taken the discourse-oriented approach (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2014) to study entrepreneurship or, indeed, to intervene in the intellectual tradition that builds upon male-centered understandings and masculine norms by foregrounding the voices and experiences of women entrepreneurs (e.g., Ahl, 2006; Brush et al., 2019). By bridging theoretical perspectives that orient to the duality of structure and human practices, discourses or systems of meaning and practice (re)production, specific practices in forms of living language, and sociomateriality, I elevate considerations *of the co-agency of discourses and communicators* in the making of realities, which reflects a feminist new materialist turn (Harris, 2015). These considerations not only advanced both RDT and SMI on a metatheoretical level, but also foregrounded the often erroneously overlooked agency of Chinese women, as part of the women bodies (of color) in the non-West, the developing worlds (Ramanath, 2019; Rosenlee, 2006). That is, women across the globe are in *both similar and* different ways enacting agency to actively participate in reality production and reproduction, despite realistic constraints. In short, the contribution is manifold. By doing so, I respond to the recently reissued call for feminist organizational communication studies by the feminist special issue of *Managerial Communication Quarterly*, in which scholars elevated intersectionality, especially considering experiences beyond or across White and/or Western boundaries, as a critical goal (see Cruz & Linabary, 2021).

To this end, I further expound upon my findings in the remainder of this chapter as support for my claims of theoretical (and later, practical) contributions. To do so, I call back and juxtapose each subtheme/sub-discourse of DOM and DOI presented in Chapter 4. I then discuss how Chapter 5 contributes to RDT, followed by a list that offers a quick view of all identified patterns, and I discuss how the project contributes to SMI. Furthermore, following this

discussion of theoretical contributions and findings, I identify seven themes of limitations that then point to future research. Lastly, I offer practice applications to members from associations (of women entrepreneurs) who helped me find participants.

6.1 Contributions: Engaging with Literature Through Competing Discourses

DOM itself is a relation/phenomenon/structure within which²⁷ Chinese women entrepreneurs emerged as misplaced bodies who did not belong (i.e., the Other) in the entrepreneurial world, sitting on the fringe or “lurking on the boundaries” of legitimacy, not fully recognized as legitimate bodies (Mavin & Grandy, 2016). As discourse is the system determining what can be said and practiced (Barad, 2007; Foucault, 1990), within the DOM, participants’ narrative accounts revealed their challenged identification with their gender and entrepreneurial identities in their relational processes involving different specific and symbolic interactants. Their sense of misalignment was further explicated in five subthemes or sub-discourses that can be considered specific properties that informed about the situated details and nuances of their experiences of misalignment or misplacement. The subthemes are: (1) (Unsettled) women and femininity unsettle business; (2) women entrepreneurs ruin *nei-wai* (inside-outside) balance; (3) motherhood is incompatible with career; (4) women/girls need a stable job instead of ventures; and (5) women in the face of immovable traditions. Each of them is to be further expounded upon after this summery.

Overall, the findings making up DOM add to the literature that aims to reveal women’s experience of entrapment resulted from the *existing*, established gender dualisms (essential binary gender-specific traits and the taken-for-granted attachment between biological sex and gender that trigger women members’ contradictory experiences) and the paradoxical placement

²⁷ Consistent with both structuration and agential realism approaches, this relation must not be thought as existing prior to relating.

of women in masculine organizational contexts (Buzzanell, 2020; Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). Much of the theme of the DOM, including its five subthemes, focused on presenting constraints that Chinese women entrepreneurs faced in negotiating contradictory ideologies (e.g., professionalism vs. motherhood and womanhood). It is through the same meaning-making process on both their end and my end (as the conversational partner and an analyst) that enablers of their entrepreneurial identification emerged.

In contrast, each subtheme in the overarching theme of DOI revealed a specific layer of the process through which women transformed what were constitutive of Chinese women (e.g., the meaning of motherhood) and the identity of entrepreneurship (e.g., entrepreneurial “traits”), thereby integrating the tensions between women and entrepreneurship. In each subtheme, participants centralized the possibility of women in businesses while casting ideas of DOM to the fringe. These subthemes are: (1) Women entrepreneurs and femininity enrich entrepreneurship; (2) women entrepreneurs create new family harmony; (3) motherhood and entrepreneurship complement each other; (4) women/girls seek entrepreneurial adventures; (5) women in the wake of progressive changes.

Feminist studies in organizational communication (and other fields) have also branched to explore how and what worked for women, that is, the discursive practices women enact to make things work despite the paradoxical positioning of women in masculine organizing (Buzzanell, 2020; Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017). One stream of study, for example, highlights women as agents of change, who actively voice against the idea of female passivity, intervene in social reproduction and policy-making, and participate in politics (Markham, 2013). For instance, in contexts of the Global South, where women are perceived as only being oppressed and victimized by Orientalist thinking, Indian women agents of change have weakened their

ancestral ties to historically disadvantaged castes by participating in permanent wage labor (Luke & Munshi, 2011). In another case of Asia's largest urban resettlement in Mumbai, women residents were more than passive recipients of environmental changes resulted from the interplay of government and non-profit organizations (NGOs). Indeed, they actively participated in the sensemaking process whereby new communities and homes emerged by interacting with NGOs addressing issues such as housing instability (Ramanath, 2019). In Long's (2015) dissertation, women entrepreneurs from China, Denmark, and the United States, were described as design agents of their own careers.

My findings in the second theme join this move to theorize women in the present study also as agents of change actively intervening in the (re)production of discourses (and materiality, Barad, 2007) around gender and entrepreneurship, in the Chinese cultural context, or the (re)construction of the gendered identities of the entrepreneur by findings ways to maintain their identities of (Chinese) women entrepreneurs. I also did so by orienting to how they changed the underexplored "micro dynamics" of Chinese women's entrepreneurial process (Hussain et al., 2010). In what follows, I put subthemes in DOM and DOI in juxtaposition.

6.1.1 Unsettlement VS. Enrichment

First of all, *(unsettled) women and femininity unsettle business* was a theme where tensions centered around the gender category of women in relation to the professional context of entrepreneurship and the national context of China, regarding more general ideations (and materializations) such as what it meant to be women, what women were supposed to do by "traditions" or "customs," and where Chinese women belonged. This subtheme therefore also provided a backdrop for other ones that concerned more specific aspects and instances of their

lives. Overall, in this theme, participants' accounts depicted (i.e., made present) such a reality characterized by the several layers regarding how unsettlement took shape.

First, this unsettlement was rooted both in the distal links of struggles engaging with larger cultural discourses (e.g., values, virtues) and generalized, symbolic others (e.g., Chinese people; people in the sports industry) and was enacted in proximal links when they interacted with specific family members, business stakeholders, and neighbors.²⁸ Second, their accounts of unsettlement had overall negative valence, featuring the evocation of, for instance, discomfort, awkwardness, (self-directed) disapproval, amazement, and so forth. In addition, in a world made present by participants, it was not only them as the embodiment of femininity unsettle others and the environment made of these different bodies, but also themselves, as part of the phenomenon, being unsettled by others and even themselves (speaking of the multifaceted selves). Third, in the present masculine gender order characterized by gender binary (i.e., “women” and “men”), unsettlement was not simply resulted from men (in their accounts) suppressing women but was also enacted by women (including participants themselves), perpetuating masculine norms. Fourth, the sexualized physical bodies of participants were constitutive of this unsettlement.

These findings underlying unsettlement resonated with studies on women's abjection as part of gendered organizing (Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Abjection accounts for unconformable experiences of “not-yet-subject,” characterized by the felt isolation, alienation, and estrangement, as a body not fully recognized and accepted as a subject (therefore abject) by dominant social norms, discourses, and orders (Butler, 1989; Höpfl, 2004). A body rendered abject may evoke contradictory in herself and others a range of strong feelings such as anxiety, fear, fascination, and repulsion (Rizq, 2013). This theme wherein women entrepreneurs became a source of

²⁸ Although I am focusing on human actors here, it does not mean nonhumans have not involved in these distal-proximal discursive struggles.

unsettlement to themselves through interactions illuminated abjection in specific local contexts. However, my use of the term “unsettlement,” synonymous with “disruption,” was a deliberate choice that alludes to intervention and change (Cruz & Linabary, 2021; Walker & Rojas, 2021). By practicing male gender-stereotyped social activities through entrepreneurship while embodying womanhood, they were altering the flows of masculine organizing (Buzzanell, 1994), which is a perfect segue to the enrichment theme in DOI.

In dialectical relations with unsettlement was the sub-discourse organized under women entrepreneurs enrich entrepreneurship. It was still a theme that addressed more general ideas around women and femininity and their presence and placement in the business context, which also served to set the tone of the DOI, a tone revealing positive attitudes toward the legitimacy of women entrepreneurs. The idea of women enriching entrepreneurship was still activated on distal and proximal links in retrospective and anticipated interactions with different peoples, perhaps responding to the unsettlement on all sites. They performed/enacted organizational identities (e.g., occupational, managerial), which were often masculine (and male) by gender stereotyping and binary, in the becoming of their female bodies (I mean the femaleness of their bodies was also a constant construction through relating bodies). Enacting such a paradoxical condition, women professionals across sectors (e.g., women engineers; women political leaders; managerial women) often conformed to masculine norms (i.e., professionalism historically created from the perspectives of men) to become “one of the guys” (e.g., Hatmaker, 2013). This conformity also was practiced by my participants. However, by enrichment, I only consider moments where participants elevated femininity, though still as sets of essential traits and trait-based behaviors, whereby they attempted to expand the understanding of entrepreneurship to push the male gender stereotyping of the entrepreneur forward. However, still framing entrepreneurship and

leadership by gender dualism (e.g., softness as a unique strength of women entrepreneurs), these discourses reproduced femininity as the Other to the masculine norms, still marginalized in the current gender order (instead of normalizing femininity). Nevertheless, in their process of talking about women entrepreneurs' possibility to do both masculinity and femininity (framed as having both traits), a few participants decoupled these traits from sexed bodies to potentially queer the identity of the entrepreneur. This sensemaking process was enabled by the Taoist metaphysic whereby *yin* and *yang* associated with femininity and masculinity were recognized as moving forces of the universe larger than essential traits of beings.

In addition to concerns about what traits were suited for entrepreneurship, the presence of women bodies in positions of power (not just successful women entrepreneurs) discursively enriches entrepreneurship for participants as well, both on distal and proximal sites of meaning construction. On one level, Mingzhu Dong, a well-known Chinese businesswoman, emerged as an archetype for (women) entrepreneurs, who not only served to make the identity of women entrepreneurs meaningful but also was the role model of some participants. On another level, when present, women entrepreneurs and government leaders in some participants' networks (including themselves) functioned as role models, mentors, and overall a source of support for other women. Perhaps the presence of these women helped further materialize an integrated relationship between womanhood and professionalism.

6.1.2 Ruining Balance VS. Creating New Harmony

Secondly, in the subtheme of *women entrepreneurs ruin nei-wai (inside-outside) balance*, participants demonstrated how their sensemaking and maintenance of their family and working lives were troubled by specific Chinese idioms/*chengyu* (and adages and proverbs) that perhaps so effectively acted on behalf of patriarchal traditions in Confucianism. The most frequently

occurred *chengyu* was “相夫教子/*xiang fu jiao zi*” (to assist one’s husband and educate the children), which so concisely dictates the confining gender roles of Chinese women. Another example was “男主外女主内/*nan zhu wai nv zhu nei*” (a man masters the outside; a woman masters the inside), by which the gendering of the regions of social lives was determined similarly to the division of private and public spheres (Suter, 2018).²⁹ By these messages, women’s roles and activities were rendered only intelligible at home.

The force of *xiang fu jiao zi* was marginally explored in three existing studies on the experiences of Chinese women who actively maintained professional lives and careers *outside* the familial realm. One was Long’s (2015) dissertation in which 15 Chinese women entrepreneurs’ experiences were studied from the perspective of career design. In her project, one participant (Xiaoni) was suggested by male investors that she *should xiang fu jiao zi*, which Long interpreted as instantiating “[t]he gender stereotype that women should take domestic responsibility” which delegitimized the participant’s business on an occasion where her female body was “ventriloquized” into the funding seeking experience (p. 125). In another study (Tsang et al., 2011) on the leadership experience of five women administrators in the higher education sector, participants also aligned with an “ideal womanhood” associated with activities that could be captured by this specific phrase (e.g., upholding/maintaining the “dignity” of relatively “less successful husband” while serving as the primary caretaker for the daughter). In another project of mine (Tian & Bush, 2020), this specific idiom also occurred in some participants’ discourses, with the expectations it invoked being major concerns for them.

²⁹ One critical nuance pointed out by Rosenlee (2006) was that, although being divided spaces, the idea of *nei-wai* lives and spaces complement one another, compared to the ideation of private-public spheres being intrinsically segregated and contradictory, left room for the possibility of women transgressing spaces.

In this sense, I consider this specific idiom as a “thing,” a nonhuman agent/actor, materialized to a great degree through participants’ accounts, in which other human and nonhuman actors were also called forth to embody the discourse (Cooren, 2020). This interpretation also applies to all other *chengyu*/idioms, proverbs, adages, and any other widely circulated words and phrases, many of which I have identified throughout. That is, they come to matter to also embody a presence, to become a thing, that exerts forces on how other bodies (here, participants) act (Barad, 2007). In Long et al.’s (2018) study on Post-80s Chinese professional’s communicative enactment of resilience, several *chenyu* were conceptualized as discursive resources people drew to activate resilience processes (e.g., affirming identity anchor). If discourse materializes/matters by playing a role in boundary making, *chengyu* and other forms of life-shaping “memorable messages” (Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018), which indeed often enact local semantic determinacy, may be more than a resource to be mobilized. Instead, these messages instead actively offer sources of meanings, ordering the local meaning making and making people act in certain ways. Here, the discourse of *xiang fu jiao zi* and other similar messages indeed intervened in/troubled participants’ meaning making as women in the outside/*wai* locales normed masculine.

Nevertheless, *xiang fu jiao zi* and other conventional gender discourses it made present were not fixed in participants’ accounts, nor was family balance or harmony built upon these discourses. As active agents themselves, participants could reinterpret meanings and recalibrate family discourses (e.g., who belonged inside or outside) in relation to their careers, to practically make possible their co-existence. The subtheme, women entrepreneurs create new family harmony, focused on moments when participants enacted discursive practices to meaningfully integrate work and family. Unlike what *xiang fu jiao zi* determined, by which women’s values

were determined by their fulfillment of conventional gender roles bound to the family, in forms of newfound family harmony, women's values and their embodiment of these roles became multidimensional and can be enacted agentially, far beyond just assisting the husband and educating the child as an obedient woman at home. Even when they were more dedicated in paid activities not typically associated with family (i.e., how "work" is usually understood, Jung & O'Brien, 2017), their *outside* labor through participating in businesses and other forms of social production still made sense on the *inside*, and could even enable the process of maintaining a family life.

By presenting such a fuller image of women within the familial context, participants demonstrated their practice of reimagining and reclaiming gender roles and expectations (e.g., what a housewife is supposed to do) through the ongoing negotiation involving other immediate and/or distal interactants. Specifically, these practices might be enabled by their managerial skills gained from work. As they maintain the work and family relation, their material contribution (e.g., wealth) achieved through entrepreneurship and meaningful participation in the family dialogue (e.g., spouse talking about work) took the front stage. Overall, in this subtheme, I highlighted a meaningfully expansive family balance or harmony, where occupational and other identities *outside* work (Ashcraft, 2013) could meet beyond collision, reconciliation, or women doing it all.³⁰ However, I do not intend to claim, with naivety, that the conflict between family and work identities and discourses has been solved once and for all for participants whose voices helped create this subtheme. Indeed, the new balance is still, as Jingjing said, a dynamic one often maintained carefully by participants through struggles. Meanwhile, the boundary between

³⁰ It is crucial to note that the new harmony, as described here, and specific practices some participants utilized could be a privilege unavailable to other women, even within the current project. For example, not everyone has access to supportive family relationships, and doing it all might not be by choice.

fair arrangement and the exploitation of women's working bodies remains unclear, situational, and subjective, depending on the communicators' (including myself) standpoints. Nonetheless, foregrounding women participants' enactment of agency in structuration (participating in local constructions of meanings) is also an important move to move beyond only seeing ("Oriental") women as entrapped, inactive objects (Putnam & Ashcraft, 2017; Rosenlee, 2006).

A further contribution to family studies was that participants' consideration of family harmony in relation to their entrepreneurship went beyond just immediate family contexts (e.g., parent-child, siblings, cross-generational) to also consider harmony among kin networks and even the hometown community. In their accounts, the legitimacy of their entrepreneurial identities considering family was further made possible by expanding the context or the boundary of the family itself enabled by the vast kinship ties and complex *guanxi* network in Chinese culture. Drawing on these different beneficiaries within wider networks beyond immediate family, some participants further materialized the values women entrepreneurs could bring to "families," strengthening the DOI.

6.1.3 Incompatibility VS. Complementarity between Motherhood and Entrepreneurship

Thirdly, the subtheme *motherhood is incompatible with entrepreneurship* revealed how participants understood pregnancy, motherhood, and their relationship with their professional lives and occupational identities. Overall, the *locally enacted* causal relation by participants (i.e., their observation of the relation of bodies) suggested that *because* (1) pregnancy and giving birth (in a heterosexual marriage) were inevitable and (2) mothers must physically be around their children constantly (accompanying their children), women were "*naturally*" disadvantaged and less effective in maintaining entrepreneurship and professionalism. On the flip side was that women entrepreneurs, considering their demanding work, could not perform motherhood and

womanhood (i.e., the identity of mother, rendered necessary for the identity of woman) in ideal ways, according to available discourses on both distal and proximal sites of talk (e.g., cultural ideas and what family members said).

The discourse of biological determinism and gender dualism that emerged from different links of talk (i.e., in recalled conversations and the interview as the speech event), which here again assumed the necessity of biological motherhood and unquestioned “natural” and “ideal” ways of performing motherhood (e.g., mothers are supposed to accompany their child), made “women entrepreneur” an internally contradictory concept/category/identity. This contradiction was then characterized by the embodied consequences that could be again understood in terms of the awkward, uncomfortable in-betweenness of abjection (see above), and participants struggling attachment to and emotions about either role based on contradictory ideologies of motherhood and professionalism (Buzzanell et al., 2005).

Voicing otherwise (not fully rejecting) was the subtheme, *motherhood and entrepreneurship complement each other*. Although biological motherhood remained unchallenged, participants’ accounts in this theme generated an integrated relationship between motherhood and entrepreneurship, wherein motherhood identification was no longer a hindrance to work and business. On the contrary, participants’ specific ways of performing motherhood and their entrepreneurial activities became complementary, or they enabled each other.

This meaningful transformation was instantiated in several practices identified in this subtheme. First, echoing “mumtrepreneurship” studies across cultural contexts, motherhood itself was the driver or motivation for some participants to start exploring entrepreneurship in the first place (e.g., Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Schindehutte et al., 2003). According to Ekinsmyth (2011), “embracing rather than contesting the role of mother” mumtrepreneurship is a “business

practice that attempts to recast the boundaries between productive and reproductive work” (p. 104); a mumtrepreneur or “business mum” discovers and exploits new business opportunities within a social and geographical context that seeks to integrate the demands of motherhood and business ownership” (p. 105). In this specific theme, some participants attributed their entrepreneurial intention to their felt needs to create and provide a better environment for their children by earning more than a fixed wage.

Unique to the Chinese context, two participants also specified that the reason why they started private businesses was that they wanted to have more than one child, which would be impossible (unless special cases such as the first born being disabled) for employees of public institutions and state-run businesses due to the only child policy. In either case, the gender role of mother became a resource enabling their discovery of entrepreneurship (Leung, 2011). It is important to note that while mumtrepreneur literature tends to focus on women owners of micro to small, family home-based businesses, most of my participants were owners and managers of scaled-up firms (even multibillion, multi-national enterprises), but might still acknowledge motherhood as a driver and find ways to meaningfully integrate motherhood and entrepreneurship.

Further down this line of thought, this subtheme identified specific ways of how some participants recast the boundaries between and meanings of motherhood and entrepreneurship. For one, they drew on their career dedication and business success resulted from their entrepreneurial activities to reimagine the performativity of a good mother (i.e., to create more possibilities) that went beyond the idea that good mothers must physically be constantly around their children. Instead, they emphasized career mothers acting as role models who could in the long-term positively influence their children, such as cultivating their professionalism. For

another, reflecting the buzz word “innovation” in entrepreneurship, some participants practiced motherhood in innovative ways by involving their children in their professional activities for educational purposes, such as exposing them to networking events. In this sense, entrepreneurship provided valuable resources for motherhood and child cultivation.

Beyond what mumentrepreneurship studies usually explore, such as how women find congruence between motherhood and business identities or the push-pull factors in their experiences, a few participants demonstrated how motherhood could enable the construction and maintenance of their organizational and occupational identities. They did so by utilizing discourses around motherhood, such as biological motherhood (e.g., giving birth and raising the child), as well as their own experiences of being mothers, to frame not only their connections with the enterprises that they created (or to which they “gave birth”) but also their management styles. In this sense, motherhood became a meaning-making device for their entrepreneurship.

6.1.4 Needing Stable Job VS. Seeking Ventures

Fourthly, in the subtheme, *women/girls need a stable job instead of ventures*, participants revealed through their narratives an assumptive *alignment*, or fit, between women and the notion of stable job. Consequently, as entrepreneurship was associated with the risk-taking of ventures and the unpredictability of adventures, women and entrepreneurship were disassociated from one another (i.e., misalignment). Studies on occupational identity or the processes and dynamics of constructing and maintaining certain alignments of various work identities (Ashcraft, 2013) tend to focus on how interactions in the workplace shape understandings and expressions of the self (e.g., Jones & Clifton, 2018; Mullens & Zanoni, 2019; Nelson & Irwin, 2014; Smith et al., 2019). In this subtheme, the taken-for-granted women bodies’ alignment with stable jobs and misalignment with entrepreneurship was maintained mainly through their proximal dialogue with

people outside of their work networks, in contexts typically not considered to be workplaces, such as parents at home and neighbors in a local community.

One thing that stood out in this subtheme was that women's participation in the workforce—being employed—was at least acknowledged and even endorsed, moving beyond conventional family discourses mentioned above by which “woman” as a category was only meaningful in the inside space of the family home. Nevertheless, even this discursive practice that enabled women's participation in social production was still tethered to familial constraints stemming from fixed ways of understanding and practicing womanhood in which it was still women taking care of the family that sit at the center of women's performativity, while family balance still revolving round home and conventional gender roles. While stable job could be desirable to anyone, as the idea of “iron bowl” or “gold bowl” connoted, stating that women/girls *just* need stable jobs was no longer concerning the nature of the employment, but rather the *inhibited* regionalization of women's activities and their working bodies (Beauvoir, 2011). That is, by the fixed gender order, participants' participation in social production only made sense if it enables them to continue, for example, dedicating themselves to “assisting the husband and educating the child.” Consequently, a Chinese woman choosing entrepreneurship characterized by risks and changes that demands attention over a stable job became an incomprehensible event. Additionally, this practice of fitting women into stable jobs was also rooted in assumptions about women's fragility or, in China's rhetoric, women's biological inferiority as part of their “low quality” used to explain away the lack of women participating in political leadership (Edwards, 2007). This idea was also internalized and perpetuated by many participants themselves, who gendered certain “traits” and activities of theirs that fitted entrepreneurial ventures masculine (e.g., boy-like; like a man).

Stable jobs, however, turned out to be not so popular a choice among participants. The subtheme, *women seek entrepreneurial ventures*, was made of participants' counter-narratives to the assumptive fit between women/girls and stable jobs. Participants in this subtheme also foregrounded their individuality and agency (i.e., what they wanted for self-worth and taking action to make changes), offering alternatives to only seeing women's participation in production (work) valuable and sensible if it enabled fulfilling gender roles (e.g., *xiang fu jiao zi*). Specifically, participants, speaking from their women bodies, disassociated themselves from the "desirable" stable jobs, discursively aligning themselves instead with the risks, changes, and unpredictability characterizing entrepreneurship. Most of them also chose the risky ventures of entrepreneurship, disregarding or even rebelling against the concern, puzzlement, disagreement, and/or disapproval of their family members, friends, and neighbors (proximal voices).

Meanwhile, instead of considering family balance or harmony or what the family members wanted or children, they prioritized their selfhood (e.g., what *I* want; self-worth) in these narratives, unlike the focus of previous themes. That their entrepreneurial venture and intention were also rooted in their individuality was acknowledged, which I see as a self-empowering discursive move through which *she* emerged as a full subject who could speak for herself and act on her own behalf in her own storytelling or storied becoming. Additionally, in this subtheme, I mentioned their venturing in entrepreneurship as a way to leave organizational control that they experienced as previous members of state-affiliated organizations without further unpacking this layer. I did so to keep this subtheme (*women seek entrepreneurial ventures*) somewhat aligned with its counterpart in the DOM, to focus more on the self-family-work dynamics. My choice also considered the length of the chapter. The complication brought

in by organizational control, however, is worth future exploration in a standalone manuscript that only homes in on the dynamics of these two subthemes.

6.1.5 Immovable Traditions VS. Progressive Changes

Finally, the fifth subtheme, *women in the face of immovable traditions*, featured participants discussing structural barriers and specific systemic practices (instantiating structural barriers) that made changes/new possibilities seemingly impossible. In this theme, there were loosely sanctioned, deeply embedded, and likely seldomly challenged rules regarding patriarchy and how business should be conducted as well as specific words people said and activities that they did through which these rules were instantiated. For an example that “kills two birds with one stone,” consider a woman entrepreneur must attend a dinner party with several male clients/collaborators for business, at which drinking is involved *by customs*, only to be targeted by others’ gossip afterward.

I identified three different concerns in participants’ critical accounts of these rules and practices, which shared a commonality characterized by the tension between desired changes/new meanings and fixated traditions/conventions. The concerns were about (1) a long-lasting and still ongoing history of patriarchy; (2) the Chinese drinking/alcohol culture (not just commonly practiced at business lunches/dinners and/or other socializing occasions; (3) the “second-child” policy that helped (re)surface and centralize pregnancy and women’s birth-giving bodies in the public discourse. Knowing the scale of impact of specific concerns or their relationship with factors such as participants’ entrepreneurial intention was not the goal of this study, nor did I intend to delve deep into each of the three issues that were institutionalized (it would be an excellent future study). What *mattered* here, in answering my questions, was precisely that they mattered to participants’ meaning making of not only their work and

entrepreneurial identities but also their gender and national identities (Chinese women). Simply put, participants cared about these three matters in their discussion of Chinese women's participation in businesses and negotiation of working lives. In general, they were concerned about how deeply rooted some gender biases (e.g., women are not supposed to lead) and gendered practices (e.g., alienating businesswomen from networking opportunities) were, a subjectively sensed impossibility to changes (to the current gender order). Then, they also expressed (strong) distastes for an unstoppable custom, being forced to drink an excessive amount of alcohol in business socializing, which they deemed a tradition in masculine organizing that was part of the deeply rooted problems/challenges for women. Lastly, reflecting the *motherhood is incompatible with entrepreneurship* theme, the recent policy change (the control over women's pregnancy) regarding childbirth also was spoken as a source of some participants' anxiety. The irony was that, although it was supposed to be a loosened control—from only child to two or even more children—to participants, what came with it was the expectation for working women to return to the family, to be once again confined to the *inside* by what mothers (a taken-for-granted stage for women) were supposed to do.

Like in other themes, there were different human interactants located at different sites of communicative events (e.g., distal-already; distal-not-yet-spoken), such as “men,” “women,” parents, and colleagues. What came to matter more in this specific theme (as well as through other themes) was an interactant that was usually not considered human, that is, China as a nation. In participants' accounts, China *emerged* as an acting agent that, for example, determined how things are supposed to be conducted (e.g., how a family should be maintained; how women should behave; how business is done). Its becoming of an entity/body was *linked* (i.e., relational) to other acting agents enacting social practices (the structuration of China), such as all kinds of

human actors, including participants and me. I want to highlight another relational partner, the nation-state, that is also meaningfully participating in the relational dialectics of Chinese women entrepreneurs' becoming. This interpretation has not occurred in extant RDT studies that focused on micro interpersonal relationships (e.g., family members; spouse) but is indeed supported by Bakhtin's (1986) dialogism. Consider the example for monologue, or a single voice system, in dialogism, for which he used Soviet Russia's single voice state (Baxter, 2011), *the voice of a state!*

While the subtheme, *women in the face of immovable traditions*, was painted with traces of helplessness and hopelessness, participants also spoke of their sensed hopefulness, particularly in their accounts of observable progressions in women's participation in social production. In a structural sense, that is, considering by reflexively enacting social practices, actors can (re)produce structure (Giddens, 1984), participants began to consider that as more women emerge to join in social production, thereby changing the structure of economy by altering specific practices that maintain rules and resources. For example, maybe the alcohol/drinking culture developed through cisgender men's socializing could be changed as more cisgender women appear as decision-makers at business dinner parties. In my current findings, there were not enough specifics regarding these changes in systemic practices, apart from participants' general sense of more women have come to change the game. These specifics would make valuable goals for future studies on systemic changes in terms of gender in/equality and in/equity, such as the emancipation of women in certain contexts (Mumby et al., 2017). Likewise, participants made present larger ecological factors within and across the borders of China that created opportunities for women, such as the reform and opening up and entrepreneurial opportunities that have come along and better education. Though specific factors

are not the focus of my current project, they matter in the discursive struggle, in that these factors existed meaningfully to induce hopefulness in participants, so that they were not only discouraged by seemingly unchangeable patriarchal traditions. Consequently, participants could envision better possibilities for Chinese women, such as the emancipation of women and the normalization of women entrepreneurs' presence (considered already in-process).

Additionally, in this subtheme, China's long history emerged as a productive, paradoxical source of meaning making. Whereas the long history made changes on customary practices seemingly impossible, when some participants drew the boundary between the old/ancient China (thousands of years old) and the contemporary "new China" (decades young), the long history became a plausible explanation for participants to make sense of the slow progression (indeed not so slow anymore). This interpretation, coupled with observable social changes (e.g., better education for women) and their embodied experiences as career women active beyond the inside, helped them maintain a sense of hope. In hope studies (Snyder et al., 1996), it has been long established that, at the individual level, hope could be understood as entailing a sense of successful agency or "the perceived capacity for initiating and maintaining the actions necessary to reach a goal" and pathways or "perceived ability to generate routes to one's goals" (p. 321). Participants' accounts revealed a sense of hope drawing from meaningful matters, both enabling agency and (temporally) extending pathways.

In this section, by reviewing and summarizing findings in Chapter 4, I put this project in conversation with several streams of scholarship. Next, I specifically turn to discuss how I contributed to RDT and SMI.

6.2 Contribution to RDT

In Chapter 5, I drew on the key propositions of SMI (identification as situated action) to extend the RDT, by not only identifying how discourses interpenetrate, but also explore in more

nuances the discursive practice of actors/participants in the duality of their specific practices and the dynamic relations of dialectical discourses. Stated otherwise, I applied RDT studies' established forms to identify patterned situated enactment of gender and occupational identities in the current context through which the identity of Chinese women entrepreneurs was produced and reproduced. Doing so demonstrated a practical way to engage with the SMI model.

6.2.1 Sociomateriality of Dialectical Discourses

RDT concerns discourses and discursive struggles, but currently studies mainly focus on utterances, voices, and spoken words in meaning construction. What if, in its very own spirit, the meaning of meaning construction in RDT becomes more expansive itself to tap more than what is spoken or not spoken, not only in terms of speech communities and unsaid rules but also the meaningful actions? What theoretical potential has been shrouded by the current focus on words and the textuality of human experiences? After all, a discourse or a system of meaning certainly is more than what is said and written, but instead, a system of practices determining what can be said and done and be considered intelligible (e.g., whose bodies are normal within a context), by which material bodies (e.g., heterosexual bodies and homosexual bodies) are produced (Foucault, 1990) and identities come to exist through performativity (Butler, 1999). Bearing this curiosity in mind, in my project, I extend RDT by also considering the idea of mattering/materialization of meaning in my analysis. I drew on Barad's (2003, 2007) version of sociomateriality (i.e., agential realism), which emphasizes the inseparability of meaning and matter in the performative becoming of worlds (i.e., realities), to complicate the very notion of talk and dialogue (e.g., do they have to be spoken?) that activate meaning construction and worlds making.

To summarize some key points in agential realism again, Barad (2003, 2007) theorized about how matters (e.g., bodies) are discursively produced, a Foucauldian notion iterated by Butler in her writing of performativity (1999). According to Barad (2003, 2007), matter comes to exist (present itself) not as a singularity but as one of the components constitutive of a relation/phenomenon (e.g., a tree is only meaningful within an ecosystem). These components, however, are not preexisting entities with preset boundaries and bodies in a vacuum, but rather are relating (intra-acting) beings enacting differential practices of boundary making *together with other beings*, and the one-other separation itself—the identity construction or boundary making—is within the relation (e.g., a tree matters as a tree in its relative position to a squirrel). Within an ongoing phenomenon (e.g., an ecosystem; the dichotomization of male and female), it is through enacting discursive practices of boundary making that bodies become locally determined (i.e., meaningful), to gain a presence, and thereby come to matter/materialize (within the locally determined causal structure of a relation). That multiple (human and nonhuman) bodies performing/enacting local determinacy is agency, which is not a human attribute, but the ongoing enactment of boundary making. In considering the communicative making/constitution of organization, Cooren (2004, 2010) has written extensively about nonhuman forms of agency, especially in the form of organizational texts (e.g., memos, mission statement; these texts are separated from their authors due to distancing) that enact organizing and order (and are ordered by) human agents. Cooren (2020) recently argued that *materiality is a matter of degree*, depending on bodies and their forms that come together to perform the presence of a thing, a person, or an event within communication. When it comes to the becoming of “humans” (e.g., the identity of work and its association with certain human bodies), researchers should foreground the boundary-making practices performed together by different materializing bodies

(Ashcraft, 2013). Importantly, these bodies often speak not in words (discourse is not equal to spoken words, Barad, 2003) but instead through embodiment (speaking is but a type of embodied act, Baxter, 2011).

In short, I drew on these two arguments in agential realism: (1) Meaning materialize³¹ through the performativity of emerging human and nonhuman bodies coming together to enact boundary making practices (to co-create identities of things) or, simply put, discourse matters; (2) agency is entailed in mattering of things and people and therefore can be enacted by and attributed to humans, nonhumans, and relations (Cooren, 2004; Harris, 2015). Further considering the idea of discursive materiality in RDT, discourses, including their struggles, materialize in a (re)formative process through bodies enacting them in their meaning making (e.g., the different ways of embodying discourses of motherhood, Suter et al., 2015). The discursive practice can be more than words, utterances, or spoken words. For example, leading a child-free life is a meaning-generative act countering the discourse of parenthood (Hintz & Brown, 2020). Furthermore, the meaning of words and utterances themselves can be expanded to consider actions saying things (which aligns with SMI's idea that identification is enacted in situated activities). Keeping the idea of talk and dialogue expansive by considering various forms of performativity opens possibilities for understating discursive struggle.

6.2.2 *The New Dimension*

With this view, I propose a fifth dimension or feature of discursive struggle, *voiced-enacted struggle*, which draws on Cooren (2020) to consider voice and enactment not as dichotomies but rather two poles of a continuum regarding how (e.g., in what forms, by whose bodies, by what means) dialectical discourses manifest. This idea indeed finds resonance in

³¹ To mean something is to materialize (Cooren, 2020) but to different extents, depending on the amount of bodies make something present.

RDT, regarding its considerations of “speaking as a concrete and embodied act...performed in unique time and space” as well as “the dialogic boundary of the said and the unsaid” regarding speech community or the immediate situation shared (or not) by speakers (p. 30). That is, RDT suggests similarly that (1) speaking concretizes, performed by a time-space situated bodies; (2) situation speaks, inexplicitly, through the embodied relations of speech community members.

Power moves within this continuum, contingent on the social locations of agents (re)presenting the discourse. For example, a discourse *appearing to be* close to the voiced pole is not necessarily weaker or an unvoiced discourse not necessarily embody a weaker presence). A taken-for-granted rule cited without explanation by people in positions of power and vaguely known by lesser members can be most powerful, for the rule has indeed been sedimented in every routine practice, so distanced that it appears to be virtual (Giddens, 1984). On the contrary, in the current study context, the marginalized DOI precariously existed through participants’ everyday enactment of their occupational identities. From a different angle, however, a woman entrepreneur in this study arguing about her competencies when faced with unconvinced stakeholders might do little to change the masculine order in business, when the DOM was instantiated by male bodies occupying every position of power and even the very practice of organizing itself (Buzzanell, 2020).

Throughout the findings (not just in the section of 5.5), I presented episodes and fuller stories of unspoken interactions (though told as stories by participants) where competing meaning systems came together to produce some interpersonal-level relational consequences. These experiences called forth a new dimension. Often, participants embodied the Other situated in specific space and time characterized by the normalized dominance of masculinity and male bodies (e.g., being ignored or insulted as a woman). Such a gender order made speaking (back)

or voicing (in their typical sense) difficult and ineffective, if not impossible, to women entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, neither were these women completely silenced nor were alternative meanings impossible to emerge (i.e., in the sense of monologue). In instances/cases across varying time spans (e.g., from a temporary collaboration to several years of the early venture), participants could act upon and intervene in specific dominant discourses informing DOM to intentionally and/or unintentionally change meanings, practices, and relationships (from interpersonal to inter-organizational). In these cases, they still addressed co-present communicators and, in so doing, (re)produced and were constrained-enabled by differently positioned discourses. There were, of course, also ways how they enacted identities and boundaries that perpetuated DOM. By structuration and sociomateriality, a specific social identity as rules and resources are instantiated or made present (materialization) through identification or situated action by agents who enact boundary making work. When the identity of the entrepreneur (a collective occupational identity) was materialized, to a great extent, by all those human and nonhuman bodies (e.g., a hierarchy in which all leadership positions are occupied by men), participants' association with the entrepreneurial identity meant and mattered little by, for example, ideas presented in DOM. Therefore, perhaps in locales/context/speech communities normed masculine and gendered male, the more acted form of intelligibility (i.e., practical intelligibility, Giddens, 1984) took precedence and more carefully enacted efforts (to make matter) become necessary when alternative meanings and narratives (e.g., women practicing entrepreneurship) do not have enough available bodies to constitute their presence.

6.2.3 Extending all Four Existing Dimensions

Additionally, RDT can be further advanced by agential realism's ontology that considers co-agency of relating human and nonhuman beings insofar as they matter/materialize themselves

within a relation. I focus on the agency of discourse as well as their various dialectical relations, both materialize or become matters through the interactants' discursive practices (currently in the form of spoken words) to make them present. To consider their capacity of enacting agency is to explore the co-agency (a structurational duality) of meanings systems and speakers; that is, it is not only speakers enact and reveal the positions of dialectical discourses, but also discourses move communicators in certain ways as they embody boundaries. Indeed, the agency of discourse, though not theorized, is implicated in the established way of how studies based on RDT 2.0 ask their standardized questions: (1) What discourse activate/animate the meaning of something, and (2) in what ways do discourses of something interpenetrate (e.g., Dutta, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Sporer & Toller, 2017; Suter et al., 2015). In these two questions, discourses actively do things, intervening in the contextualized meaning construction. However, it is in the second type of question, which concerns the movement (i.e., interplay) of discourses, that the agency of speakers takes precedence, as Baxter (2011) made clear that RDT "is not interested in understanding a given speaker's position, per se, but instead is interested in how discourses are positioned as competing" by speakers' action of (dis)alignment with discourses (p. 165). This claim prioritizes human speakers as the agents of reality production,³² in part weakening RDT's claim that culture and society (or broader domains customarily separated from the private) interpenetrate with (i.e., intervene in) interpersonal relationships. In my project, I attempted to explore how participants move *within* the relations of discourses to foreground the co-agency of competing discourses and interactants. That is, on the one hand, negating, countering, entertaining, and more are relations between DOM and DOI, made present by

³² This limited consideration of agency makes RDT vulnerable to the attack on social construction such as "so, things are just made up?" or victim blaming discursive practices (Harris, 2015).

speakers who align or disassociate with them in their accounts (agency enacted by speakers). On another, within the identified relations of discourses, participants were moved by multiple discourses to enact discursive practices to make, maintain, transform, and discard their contested identities (agency moves toward discourse). This additional layer is still not concerning the position of speakers per se, but rather the positioning (the doing) of identities under a certain order (e.g., gender order), the situated action of identification (Scott et al., 1998).

Specifically, I utilized all four existing dimensions theorized in RDT to simultaneously identify both how discourses are positioned to engage in interplay but also how speakers move within this interplay (to be summarized below). Engaging with all four existing dimensions in RDT filled another gap in extant RDT studies. As Baxter and Norwood (2015) pointed out, RDT has been criticized for having “nothing new to add—researchers keep listing the same basic discursive tensions over and over” (p. 289) and they cautioned that “it is important for scholars to resist a ‘cookie-cutter’ mentality in which contradictions identified in early work are simply overlaid onto a data set without attending to their nuances...” (p. 289). Although they suggested that this criticism targeted more at the studies following the old version of RDT (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and that RDT 2.0 came to mend the issue by orienting to specific ways how discourses are set as dominant and marginalized, a cookie-cutter mentality of RDT 2 likely has resurfaced as notable RDT studies in recent years began to circle around the *negating*, *countering*, and *entertaining* discourse markers, and occasionally the idea of discursive *hybridity* and *aesthetic moment* (e.g., Abetz, 2016; Cronin-Fisher & Parcell, 2019; Dutta, 2017; Hintz & Brown, 2020; Sporer & Toller, 2017; Suter et al., 2014, Suter et al., 2015). These patterns reflect more clearly the dimensions of antagonistic-nonantagonistic struggle and polemic-transformative struggle. Granted. Baxter (2011) specifically used *negating*, *countering*, and *entertaining* to

illustrate contrapuntal analysis or how to identify “discourses positioned in counterpoint relation to one another;” however she also called identification of other lexical markers as “fruitful area to pursue” (p. 166), but this effort has not been pushed further.

In this project, I utilized all four dimensions to guide my contrapuntal analysis. As a result, my findings not only provided support to existing discourse markers but also evidenced unexplored dimensions (i.e., indirect-direct struggle; playful-serious struggle). In this process, I went further to identify the discursive practice of participants enabled and constrained by the relations/patterns of centripetal-centrifugal struggles. These moves were all boundary making discursive practices producing bodies and identities. To present a review of these findings clearly, I list them as sections and bullet points below:

Table 5. Review of Findings

<p>Dimension I—Antagonistic-Nonatagonistic Struggle</p> <p><i>Antagonistic-nonatagonistic struggle</i> concerns whether and to what extent multiple semantic positions in dialogue clash with each other. I categorized the classic <i>entertaining</i>, <i>countering</i>, and <i>negating</i> positions into this dimension (they could also be organized under the polemic-transformative dimension).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negating: a pattern by which speakers mentioned competing positions only to completely reject/devalue one while aligning with the other. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Rebelling:</i> when the negating position was enacted, agents of DOM and DOI (e.g., a participant and her colleague who denied women of “traits” such as willpower) completely rejected each other’s perspective. The participant then rejected/resisted the naysayers precisely by <i>acting otherwise</i>, rebelling against masculine norms (e.g., women only take stable job). ○ <i>Questioning:</i> enacting questioning, a participant directly challenged the legitimacy of one discourse (the dominant DOM) by asking why (“<i>ping shen me/WHY!</i>”), sometimes even in the face of (male) bodies perpetuating DOM. Asking why was her rhetorical choice of refusing to accept DOM. • Countering: a pattern by which speakers presented competing positions only to acknowledge the limited worthiness of one while aligning with the alternative. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Disassociating:</i> practicing disassociating within countering, a participant who aligned with one discourse (e.g., DOI) devalued the alternative (DOM) and disassociated herself from (human) agents (e.g., “some women”) constituting the presence of the opposing position. In this process, however, they tried to attribute reasons to “some women’s” choices that they deemed problematic. ○ <i>Obsoleting:</i> this discursive move was enabled by the passage of time, especially considering China’s long history. Participants presented countering discourses and then devalued, resisted, and rejected DOM (the culturally dominant one) by only counting its validity in past times (and spaces), which in the specific context of this study was associated with feudal society, Confucian patriarchy the symbolic “old China,” and/or pre-reform-and-opening-up eras.
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Table 5 (Continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entertaining: a pattern acknowledging one discursive position is but one among other valid perspectives and overall possibilities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Conforming:</i> enacting a conforming move under entertaining, a participant acknowledged the value or worth of differing discourses relevant to women entrepreneurs (e.g., gender roles), while conforming to the dominant/centripetal discourses (e.g., women should do it all at home). ○ <i>Disassociating:</i> by this practice, a participant still acknowledged the values of diverging perspectives (emphasizing person choices) but disassociated herself from one choice/position (e.g., choosing to stay at home).
<p style="text-align: center;">Dimension II—Direct-Indirect Struggle</p> <p><i>Direct-indirect struggle</i> concerns the ways “ambiguity of meaning” functions in the interpenetration of discourses. Two of the three functions, ordered as the first and the third functions by Baxter (2011), were made present in two identity negotiation practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Function one (of ambiguity): ambiguity speech may create a “semantic wiggle room” or avoid direct interplay between competing discourses (Baxter, 2011, p. 104). ○ <i>Shifting:</i> maintaining an ambiguous positioning of competing discourses, a participant shifted between positions in one account (e.g., about the topic of whether men should actively perform house chores), perhaps evading the direct collision between DOM and DOI discourses and more importantly reflecting contradictory experiences women live. ○ Function three: ambiguous speech may “temper the authoritativeness” of a locally centralized discourse by using markers indicating degree (Baxter, 2011, p. 136) <p><i>Quantifying:</i> using this practice, a participant kept her words, opinions, and interpretation expansive by using quantifiers in her generalized observations, claims, and assumptions about, for example, how men and women behave differently.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Dimension III—Serious-Playful Struggle</p> <p><i>Serious-playful struggle</i> considers the “tone of an utterance” and how different tones could challenge a competing discourse in unique ways. In the current RDT framework, based on Bakhtin’s Burlesque caricatures, there are three “devices” or “stances,” namely, rogue, fool, and clown, associated with playful struggles. I identified three new devices fitting the study context, specifically about participants’ negotiation of their legitimacy and safety in business.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seriousness: a pattern, in the current study context, characterized by formal communication, serious attitude, professionalism, and overall demand for being treated seriously. • <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>The senior:</i> The most common device that a participant enacted/performed on occasions where she felt the sensitivity, awkwardness, or even threat associated with the presence of her female body in a masculine arena. The senior is a character who is professional, experienced, <i>older</i>, and all <i>serious</i> about business. ○ • Playfulness: the three identified playful devices through which a competing discourse can be challenged are characterized by indirect practices to mock, parody, ridicule, and, overall, distort the taken-for-granted meaning system. In the current context, I identified new devices by which participants as marginalized women bodies in male-dominated spaces strategically but precariously resisted the often-normalized sexual harassment in a specific networking guanxi building in China.

Table 5 (Continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>The witty</i>: this stance might be enacted by a businesswoman in intricate situations when rejecting men in power was not advisable, when faces must be maintained for businesses to be done. In a specific case, a witty woman, Hai, knew how to move her body and present herself in playful manners to evade the physical grasp of a male while not upsetting him. She also took a witty stance by mobilizing other sources of empowerment or conjuring forth (make presence) other bodies of power to level up herself in the discursive interplay.○ <i>The Xia</i>: “Xia/侠” is a heroic, romantic character archetype in Chinese literary works. A <i>xia</i> is bold and forthright and unrestrained but following certain creeds. The stance of the <i>xia</i> could be a playful one featuring an untamable nature of the actor and her no longer restrained (but not unconstrained) embodiment, potentially evoking unexpectedness in a taken-for-granted situation sanctioned by dominant discourses. In this study, Quan enacted such a Xia stance to survive attempted sexual harassment.
<p>Dimension IV—Polemic-Transformative Struggle</p>
<p><i>Polemic-transformative Struggle</i> considers the possibility of competing discourses moving beyond the previous three polemic dimensions (antagonistic vs. nonantagonistic; direct vs. indirect; serious vs. playful) to arrive at hybrid meanings, new identities, and transformed discourses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Balance: this is a relation of a state of truce between competing discourses where they reached some delicate agreement through compromising actions of different parties (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Compromising</i>: a common discursive practice in participants’ accounts about work-family balance, when “balance” was much in the polemic double-bind, women-do-it-all, and not upsetting the patriarchy sense, instead of a “dynamic balance.” Compromising was also, framed by gender dualism, compromising femininity in professional arenas normed male and masculine, thereby not disturbing the status quo.● Hybrid: This pattern is a positioning of competing discourses whereby meaningful integration and transformation starts, moving beyond a competing, zero-sum logic to give rise to meanings, narratives, and identities rendered anew.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Complementing</i>: Regarding understating work-family balance, participants presented a new balance enabled by their complementing family and occupational identities. The dynamic framing of balance entailed (1) a reinterpretation of family roles (i.e., the idea of “housewife”) and role-related responsibilities resulted from negotiation among family members; (2) emphasis on the contribution of women to family harmony enabled by entrepreneurship, instead of <i>xiang fu jiao zi</i>; (3) integration of motherhood and entrepreneurship. Complementing also concerned how participants counted femininity as a fundamental force in the constitution of society that, when enabled, create new opportunities for everybody.○ <i>Queering</i>: by this practice, participants highlighted, claimed, and identified with both femininity and masculinity, moving toward a gender performativity view that saw gender identities as situational and relational enactment and that femininity and masculinity can be hosted in one body. This tendency enabled a queering potential, untying masculinity from the category of men while femininity from women. The queering move was enabled by specific idioms (e.g., 刚柔并济/coupling softness and toughness) reflecting Taoist ideations on the relation and movement of gendered <i>yin-yang</i> and softness-toughness binaries.

6.3 Contribution to SMI

Now I turn to discuss how this project applied and contributed to SMI (Scott et al., 1998). As a reminder, a structurational model, SMI conceptualized (1) the co-constitutive relationship between identity (as virtual rules and resources or the ideas) and identification (as recursive practices/activities or systems), (2) the dynamics of multiple organizational identities at varying levels revealed through identification (i.e., membership construction and negotiation through action), and (3) regions of identities and situated actions of identification. Their discussion was informed by four salient forms of identities *in the organization* (alluding to a “container” metaphor of organization that treats organization as a preexisting entity preceding communication) identified in contemporary (to 1998) literature on organizational attachment. Enabled the formative view of organization that emphasizes “organizing” or “organizational” (Nicotera, 2020) and feminist theorizing in organizational studies that recognizes gender as an organizing force (Buzzanell, 1994, 2020), I adopted the basic assumptions of SMI, which indeed stressed a constitutive/formative view of organizational identities, to explore the interplay of occupational/work identity and gendered bodies (Ashcraft, 2013). Although gender and work identities (i.e., “woman” and “entrepreneur”) are the focus, other social identities also have come to play (to matter) through the narratives that participants shared as well as my analysis. In what follows, I draw on findings to discuss the characters of identification and identity/identification “regions” revealed through the discourses in this study, and then further discuss the idea of materiality.

6.3.1 Characters of Identification

SMI’s ideation of the four characters of identification is based on the idea of regionalization, which recognizes that society is fragmented and multifaceted (indeed, societies, realities) and therefore so are “the various rules and resources available to an agent get

regionalized, or grouped, into certain identities” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 313). In SMI, the four salient identities in organizational life (i.e., personal, group, organizational, and occupational) can overlap and interact to demonstrate compatibility *and* competition, involved in a non-zero-sum game through which actors develop “partially compatible and partially conflicting” identities (p. 314). In this study, it was precisely the dynamic interplay of participants’ contradictory yet co-existing identities that I aimed to unveil, enabled by RDT’s usefulness in recognizing nuanced patterns of how competing discourses interpenetrate. The shifting compatibility and competition or the (non-)zero-sum relations of participants’ gender and work identities were fleshed out throughout the findings. For example, (biological) motherhood, which was considered essential to womanhood by nearly all participants, had been constructed to be both incompatible and complementary with the entrepreneurial identity by some participants.

SMI assumes identities have front and back regions, aligning with the ideas of faces on back and front stages (Goffman, 1959; Haslett, 2011). The front region before the individual and collective bodies is visible and public, susceptible to control and surveillance, whereas the back region behind the body can be invisible and private, enabling deviation, subversion, resistance and potentially empowerment. Identity and identification in the front regions reveal ideal images that reflect what is culturally sanctioned and made official (in terms of, for example, premises, beliefs, values). Back regions enable distancing and even disidentifying from the ideal and official. Studies on organizational control and resistance (e.g., controlled ways to present oneself or identity regulation) have shown that organizational members may turn to back region/backstage (where the management could not see) to resist corporate control (e.g., Bristow et al., 2017; Mumby et al., 2017; Ybema & Horvers, 2017). In the lived experience of women entrepreneurs, however, the front and back regions might collide into each other in that, on the

one hand, the front regions of the entrepreneurial world has been historically and ongoingly (re)produced to be made of ideal male bodies and masculine norms where “women” become one of the “Other” (even the term “women entrepreneur” might suggest women is but an inferior alternative) if not fully excluded (Ahl, 2006; Brush et al., 2019). On the other, the front regions of womanhood (in China) have been idealized to be associated with the *nei*/inside, familial regions not typically characterized by professionalism and entrepreneurship.³³ Therefore, women entrepreneurs’ mere presence subverts or intervenes in that which is official and ideal about both entrepreneurship (male gender-stereotyped) and womanhood. Findings demonstrated how participants making meaning, both verbally and nonverbally (moving through the voiced-enacted struggle I conceptualized above), of the already contested front regions of the identity of women entrepreneurs in various relational contexts and their resistance occurred in both visible and invisible sites.

The consideration of the contested processes for participants to construct and maintain an entrepreneurial identity while in the becoming of their women bodies further complicated the rest two characters of identification in SMI: (3) identities have size and position; (4) identities are characterized by duration/tenure. Scott et al. (1998) suggested that the identities on which we spend more time working tend to have a larger size and be centralized (e.g., a tenured professor’s centralized identity might be her professorship). In their consideration of these two characters, they also discussed the difference between voluntary and involuntary identities, with the latter referencing “the identities with which we are born (e.g., gender, ethnicity, nationality),” which, despite having “the longest tenure[,] their involuntary nature may make them relatively small for

³³ Mumtrepreneurs and/or women run small businesses *at home* certainly is another practice subverting and reproducing the norms surrounding entrepreneurship (e.g., Leung, 2011). However, in my study, participants’ businesses were separated from their family homes.

many people in the absence of other influences” (p. 317). I am certain that the authors would revise this assumption to consider that this readiness and effortlessness of the “identities with which we are born” to be a privilege (to bodies who are readily male, heterosexual, and White) that many people do not have (e.g., the 253 million women who practice entrepreneurship, and what about transwomen?), since “the other influences” cannot be absent as writers of intersectionality have argued extensively (e.g., Crenshaw, 2019; hooks, 2014; Yep, 2016). For example, in managerial contexts in the United States characterized by masculine culture and Whiteness, the “involuntary” gender and race (as identities) and their visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility (linked to perceived legitimacy) of Black women managers and professionals become what they must carefully negotiate *every day* at work (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Smith et al., 2019). In the present project, gender emerged as something they both voluntarily and involuntarily work on—to construct a sort of alignment between their women bodies and the entrepreneurial identity—even for a few who claimed that in their routine entrepreneurial activities they would not see themselves (backgrounding) as women.

6.3.2 Identity Regions

Now, it makes sense to identify the multiple “identity regions” made present in participants’ accounts and how these vectors intersect, as interlocking forces, to produce similarities and differences among participants in this study. Despite the fact that they were all considered “women entrepreneurs” (by people in their networks), which was, in part, how I found them and that I could identify common themes in their accounts, several ways of how people were categorized *in China* (nationality) emerged to make the entrepreneurial process of one woman drastically different from that of another. These additional salient regions of categorizing bodies included generation, rural-urban *hukou* (i.e., household registration, Chan &

Zhang, 1999) of the family of origin, class (in terms of wealth and the political status of the family of origin), industry affiliation, marital status, and education attainment. I unfolded many nuances in findings to engage with the conversation of intersectionality; however, a fuller analysis of how these forces intersect to create oppression and privilege among participants requires a different project that perhaps fully delves into a few of their accounts and life course.

In general, the experience of a participant born post “reform and opening up” (e.g., born in the 1980s), who is from an affluent family in major cities with a “clean” political status (not affiliated with the “five black categories” identified as the enemies of Communism during the Cultural Revolution), and is highly educated and *not divorced* may be highly privileged compared to a woman, for example, who grew up in an impoverished rural area in the 1960s, has been associated with the “five black categories,” and is now divorced. Specifically, industry shaped participants’ experiences by their association with binary gender categories. For example, the sports industry was explicitly considered masculine and fit male bodies, and therefore women who run cultural and sports companies specialized in organizing large sports events (e.g., marathon; basketball game) tend to have their legitimacy questioned more by their collaborators and the public, compared to participants who conduct business in early education. The gender stereotyping of industries and how it would impact the entrepreneurial identity were not adequately explored in this project, which would be a great future goal.

In the next section, I further discuss the limitations of this project as well as point to future directions.

6.4 Limitations and Future Directions

The findings of this project shed light on many lines of research in both communication and related disciplines (e.g., women’s and gender studies, sociology). However, my insights were limited by goals, data, analysis, genre, etc., that are necessarily bound to specific theoretical

and conceptual frameworks (also as particular practices of producing boundaries). In this section, I identified seven more limitations and/or future orientations.

6.4.1 *Chengyu as Memorable Messages of Gendering*

Chengyu or Chinese idioms are short linguistic expressions frequently used in formal and informal Chinese to reference traditional Chinese ethical, philosophical, and religious ideas (Long et al., 2018). Memorable messages are long-lasting verbal messages imprinted in people's memories that are perceived to be a major influence on their course of lives, shaping personal and interpersonal meaning making (e.g., regarding health, family relationship) as well as organizational socialization (Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018). In Long et al.'s study, *Chengyu* as a form of memorable message in Chinese was explored as a discursive resource of anticipatory resilience that helped communicators reintegrate disrupted meanings amidst career setbacks. In my current project, several *chengyu* and *suyu* (i.e., adages) emerged to shed some light upon gender socialization (e.g., *xiang fu jiao zi* considered essential to womanhood by Confucianism) and gender and sex ideation (e.g., *yin-yang* and femininity-masculinity as forces of the natural order in Taoism) in Chinese cultural and social discourses. Some enabled women's entrepreneurial process, whereas some others became constraints. However, this study's aim was not particularly at these messages but instead the broader living language. A future study more closely examining these idioms and adages by which larger gender discourses could be so effortlessly invoked would be fruitful in terms of providing insights into gender socialization and construction within and beyond the moving borders of Chinese cultures (i.e., considering how widespread Confucianism and Taoism are). These messages might be thematized or be treated as nodes of semantic networks. The relations between themes or nodes would also be worth studying.

6.4.2. Thicker Intersectionality

Intersectionality underlies this project that aims to intervene in the current understanding of entrepreneurship largely based on White, Western, male perspectives and masculine organizing. I did intend to provide details that revealed how participants' experiences varied and how they were subjected to different kinds of control depending on their social locations and positions. For example, consider the difference between the experience of a woman born in the 1940s into a family with a "bad" political status and that of a Post-90s woman from a wealthy family. However, due to the research goals oriented more toward identifying commonalities among diverse experiences through thematizing (categorizing) different storied experiences, my engagement with intersectionality was perhaps not "thick" enough with fuller details and more practice of thick description and critical close read (Yep, 2016). To better unfold how interlocking mechanisms of body and identity production intersect to place Chinese women entrepreneurs into what kind of ongoing power dynamics, in terms of both privilege and marginalization, I should consider a future project with a narrative case study design that delves deeper into a few women's stories (the data already exists).

6.4.3 Queering

The queering theme was a surprise to me during analysis, just like how I did not expect a few participants to organically discuss and/or show support to queer identities (a bias based on my personal experience as a Chinese queer man). *Foregrounding* these queering moments in my theorizing was my intentional choice to intervene in the current gender binaries as well as social discourses regarding organizing (e.g., leadership and management) informed by them, responding to a call for coding organizing practices through a queer lens by Ashcraft and Muhr (2018). Limited by the study goals and specific questions, queering practices, however, only

occurred as fleeting potentials against reiterated discourses of dualisms/binaries that were also perpetuated by how I described bodies throughout, constrained (and enabled) by language itself. For example, the immediately available descriptors for sex are male and female, and in Chinese, “female” when used to modify humans (as an adjective) is the same as “women.” It gets messier when considering *English* words like “queer,” “transgender,” and “LGBTQA+” can perpetuate Western-/Anglo-Centrism. A future project should home in on how queering can happen through (what kind of) local discursive practices of boundary negotiation and what (and how) existing larger sociocultural discourses enable and constrain queering gender dualisms in China and Chinese.

6.4.4 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

In my analysis, I found a meaningful link between participants’ CSR talk and talk about how they understand the entrepreneurial identity. CSR was indeed a prominent theme, and, in short, practicing CSR was considered essential to the entrepreneurial identity. CSR studies have also begun to consider the power relations underlying CSR expectations and overall social construction of CSR as well as the identities of business owners (especially owners of SMEs) (see Morsing & Spence, 2019). In the current project, I did little with participants’ CSR communication because it did not directly inform about discourses around the idea of Chinese women entrepreneurs. For example, participants did not associate *the general idea of CSR* with femininity and womanhood. However, they might consider caring for the well-being of employees as part of CSR while stating women were more caring. Considering CSR itself, just like the corporation itself, builds on a history where women’s perspectives and labor were excluded (Spence, 2016), I have planned for a future project that explores these Chinese women entrepreneurs’ construction of CSR.

6.4.5 Entrepreneurial “Traits”/Entrepreneurship

As I have discussed extensively in previous chapters, the current understanding of entrepreneurship—what is considered to be norms—is made masculine and male-centered, wherein stereotypical “essential traits” associated with masculinity have permeated entrepreneurial discourses. In this study, participants identified many alternative traits and trait-based behaviors (e.g., resilience) that they thought to be associated more with women and femininity (e.g., what they considered as women’s strong points/strengths). I only reported some of such traits in findings because they were only a part of the concerns constitutive of competing discourses activating the idea of women entrepreneurs. A future project focusing on *the construction of* entrepreneurial traits from the perspectives of these women practitioners would be fruitful in terms of enriching how entrepreneurship could be understood and practiced. That is, considering how popular entrepreneurial discourse has already been emphasizing masculine traits so much, would it not be practical and helpful to also identify and disseminate more “feminine traits” that were essential to entrepreneurship? Granted, doing so would require discussing the danger that relying on essentialism could create.

6.4.6 More on RDT

Another possible way to extend RDT opened by recognizing agency as human and nonhuman bodies participating in meaning making is that researchers may consider how more tangible and touchable nonhuman agents (e.g., a book, an online system) actively participate in the discursive practices of boundary making or the construction of an object of meaning. For example, regarding the construction of gender identities in organizing, what clothes and dress codes say about gender performativity at work? My current analysis, though possible, did not orient to this goal. A great example of how “tangible” forms of materiality (Cooren, 2020)

actively participate in meaning making could be identified in the study by Hintz and Brown (2020). In this study, competing discourses around voluntary childlessness were wrought into being through a subreddit, “/r/childfree,” an online forum for a community of people to communicate about their shared experiences of living childfree. Although Reddit was backgrounded as a research site, it could be foregrounded as an active agent in the dialogue of the childfree status. For example, Reddit as a system hides the identities of users, so in what ways does this anonymity enable resistance? Additionally, the newly proposed voiced-enacted dimension itself needs to be further explored and fleshed out in future RDT studies, especially in terms of the nuanced patterns of discursive practices through which interactants activate voiced-enacted struggles. How this dimension link to the other four dimensions also needs future discussion. For example, are enacted discursive practices more (in)direct than voiced practices? Are transformations more enabled by actions (more in their unspoken sense, although this dimension aims to disrupt the words-action binary).

6.4.7 Methods

This study depended on qualitative interviews, which Baxter (2011) considered as a limitation of RDT scholarship itself. An alternative way to observe more directly (arguably) the interplay of discourses in-process, less in the sense of retrospective sensemaking of participants, is through shadow ethnography or passing ethnography entailing the fuller immersion of researchers into a local reality (e.g., passing as an assistant to a participant). Long (2015) used the shadow ethnography tactic for case studies on the routine of women small business owners included in her larger project on women entrepreneur’s career design. Employing such methods may allow a researcher to participate in the routine events at which women participants

situationally enact (contested) identities and discourses in their encounters with human (and nonhuman) actors.

6.5 Practical Applications

6.5.1 To Associations of Women Entrepreneurs

As local associations of women entrepreneurs (affiliated with Women's Federation) provided one way to me for finding participants, it makes sense that I offer them practical applications, drawing from the experiences of their members. These ideas may also be practical to similar networks and social support systems for women professionals in different contexts.

6.5.1.1 Feminist Writings Reading Group

Although all participants could be seen as practitioners of gender equality who actively participate in (re)producing the economic structure, some participants' unfamiliarity or even misunderstanding of feminist debates and ideas (e.g., associating negatively worded "traits" and "qualities" with femininity) in part contributed to their experienced intrapersonal conflicts and struggles (e.g., feeling uncomfortable about being more financially successful than her husband; seeing pregnancy as inevitable). Organizers of these professional associations may form reading groups that encourage members to simply read more about feminisms and have voluntary meetings where they could share and debate about their interpretations. Accessibility could be an issue, regarding, for example, where to even find these readings. One possible solution is to reach out to and invite critical scholars in local higher institutions (as some participants revealed that they did have this *guanxi*) and/or active feminist activists in China. This practice also aligns with a "constant learning" discourse that many participants emphasized. As someone who has read academic writings about feminisms and gender and organizing, I would be happy to serve as a source, participate in these discussions, and share my insights. However, I am fully aware that,

a cisgender man, my knowledge about the struggles experienced by women is never as situated and embodied.

6.5.1.2 Workshops of Reimagining Motherhood/Womanhood/Family Balance

As this project has shown, participants could reimagine, reinterpret, redefine, and ultimately reconstruct discourses surrounding constructs such as motherhood, womanhood, and family balance (often as linked ideas). For example, now that idioms, adages, and other memorable messages, such as *xiang fu jiao zi*, and *nan zhu wai nv zhu nei* appeared to be powerful agents shaping how women in this study practiced and made sense of their gender roles and family lives, a workshop where multiple women entrepreneurs come together to identify these messages in Chinese culture, reflect how they impact their lives, and practice reinterpret them could be fruitful, during which they also get to share stories with each other to create potentially empowering resonance. For instance, several participants' accounts of how their motherhood not relying on the being-constantly-around-the-children approach could still be productive might help other entrepreneurs who were feeling guilty about being away from children to see alternatives. Some mothers in this study specifically relied on verbal communication of love and care (i.e., discussing/talking with their children that they love them despite not being able to always accompany them) to maintain meaningful connections with their children. Similar tactics could be identified and practiced by a group of women. Indeed, some participants who were organizers of these associations revealed that they did have similar meetings; however, some common topics of their discussion perpetuated discourses constitutive of DOM, such as emphasizing *xiang fu jiao zi* in discussion of maintaining family balance. Learning about debates of feminisms could be helpful.

6.5.1.3 Workshop of Identifying Women Role Models

In this study, participants identified different women role models for themselves and other women entrepreneurs both in their more immediate networks (even at home when their mothers were also women entrepreneurs) and among public figures (e.g., Mingzhu Dong). These role models not only helped themselves make sense of their career experiences, but often, role models with whom they built personal relationships (e.g., friendship, mentorship) served as mentors who provided support and business resources. Workshops, where members of an association gather to identify and appreciate women outside and within the association who could be treated as role models, could generate both symbolic support (i.e., knowing that there are successful women out there) and networking opportunities where mentorship and further collaboration could form. A similar practice indeed occurred in the focus group meeting, where women praised each other as role models from whom they could learn things such as “family balance” and management styles. Two women whose different products shared the branding of “local traditional culture” also discussed possible collaboration.

6.5.1.4 Sharing Stories about Successful Women Entrepreneurs

This practice could aim at sharing women’s stories, as a way to creating alternative narratives to the stories and perspectives of successful male figures. This storytelling could be in the form of formal events, such as a colloquium, as well as episodic, word-of-mouth forms, while the audience does not have to be internal. For example, some participants have been invited to public events, such as a colloquium at a local university, to share their stories of success. An association of women entrepreneurs could encourage their members to simply share their stories when such opportunities emerge.

6.5.1.5 Discussion on Competing Discourses

The first part of the findings in this project (i.e., Chapter 4) is made of 10 themes of or five pairs of competing claims and/or descriptions surrounding the very idea of women entrepreneurs in China, distilled from the storied experiences of participants from diverse backgrounds. These claims themselves have practical values as they provide frames for understating constraints and enablers to women's participation in entrepreneurship (and overall career). They could be used on organized discussions/meetings that these associations of women entrepreneurs already have. More women practicing entrepreneurship could draw on these findings to make sense and also affirm and/or critique them by reflecting on their own experiences. Through such discussions, women practitioners may identify more constraints and enablers as well as meaningful practices of transforming constraints.

6.5.2 To Policy and Rule Makers

I could not claim practical applications on the level of public policy, due to the goals of this project, which orient to more micro levels of personal meaning making. However, I present practical problems (they are very real) that concerned most participants for deputies to different levels of People's Congress (who speak at policy-making meetings) to consider. First of all, forced alcohol drinking was identified by participants in this study to be a major challenge to women in business. Although forced drinking and excessive consumption of alcohol have been under stricter regulation in public, state-run organizations and institutions (e.g., government, state-owned enterprise), since 2017, the issues remain relevant not only in private sectors but also have been instantiated in participants' accounts of socializing with government departments. Several participants specifically associated the practice of drinking with sexual harassment that they have experienced or witnessed with government officials involved. Sexual harassment itself

is a critical matter. Secondly, the changing, loosened policy regarding childbirth (from only child to second child to completely lifted restriction) emerged as a source of anxiety to participants who were concerned not only about their own women employees but also the overall Chinese women's participation in social production. The changing national policy on childbirth demands other changes such as new forms of financial supports that would enable organizations better accommodate women's pregnancy, perhaps in part enabling a cultural shift through which pregnancy itself and by association the body of many women are no longer treated as the problem.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (English Version)

Note: Questions with the strikethrough did not work well in the first wave of interviews

1. Please draw an entrepreneur. (after drawing is complete).
 - a. *What is in your drawing?*
 - b. *Why does this entrepreneur do entrepreneurial work?*
 - c. *What do the terms entrepreneur and entrepreneurship mean to you?*
2. Tell me more about your business (or whatever they are running)
 - a. *what do you do in general? What do you do on a daily basis?*
 - b. *Who else works in the business?*
 - c. *Who are your customers/clients?*
 - d. *How is the work rewarding? Challenging? Meaningful?*
3. Tell the story about how you become an entrepreneur (i.e., your pathway to entrepreneurship)?
 - a. *How did you choose this path?*
 - b. *What motivated you to become an entrepreneur?*
 - c. *What kind of pleasures and adversities have you faced?*
4. How do you understand “women entrepreneur” and/or “women-owned business?”
5. What have you heard about entrepreneurship (from people such as your family members, friends, and colleagues) in the progress of your career? How have these talks influenced you? (slogans or photos of entrepreneurs...governmental initiatives promoting entrepreneurship and such policies...they have overheard conversations)
6. (Some of them are well-known figures in China) What kind of things do the society and media have said about you being a woman entrepreneur
7. Who has encouraged your career development? Who has discouraged you?
8. Could please describe your family? (See what or whom they consider as family)
9. How do your family members talk about your work?
 - a. *How do you know that this is how they talk about your work (or tell me a story about when you've heard your family talk about your work)?*
 - b. *What kind of comments do your family members have about your career?*
 - c. *How, if at all, have their comments changed over time?*
 - d. *What about close friends – how do they talk about your work?*

10. How do you understand family roles and family responsibilities? (See how their understanding of gender possibly unfold)
11. How is your relationship with your team members, colleagues, inferiors, or in general members of your company?
12. Could you please tell me about the times when you felt appreciation from your employers, colleagues, and/or peers?
 - a. *What kind of things you have heard from your employers, colleagues, and/or peers talk about your work?*
13. In the process of your entrepreneurship, what are situations (if any) in which your gender identity became salient (or even sensitive)?
14. What kind of gender-related challenges you have encountered in the process of creating your enterprise? (ask for an example here)
15. Imagine you are talking to a group of women who are aspired to become entrepreneurs, what kind of stories will you tell them? What suggestions will you offer?

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Chinese Version)

1. 请简单画出一个您心目中的企业或公司的管理人（符号学意义，画完后）。
 - a. 您的画中包含一些什么呢？
 - b. 这个企业家为什么做创业工作？
 - c. 请问您如何理解“企业家”一词，又如何理解“entrepreneurship 企业家身份（活动）”？
2. 请给我说说您们的企业或者公司。
 - a. 您一般的工作是什么呢或者您日常的工作是什么？
这些工作从哪些方面来讲另您觉得满意？从哪些方面您觉得有挑战？
哪些。。。有意义？
 - b. 其他还有些谁在您的公司或者企业中工作？
 - c. 您一般的客户是谁？
3. 请讲述一下您的职业道路？
 - a. 您是如何选择这条路的？
 - b. 您成为企业家的动力动机是什么？
 - c. 您这个过程中有何种喜悦，又面对过何种逆境？
4. 您如何理解“女性企业家”这一词以及“女性所有/经营的企业活动”这一概念？
5. 媒体和社会对您作为一名女性企业家有说过些什么呢？
6. 从身边的人或事物中，您有听到过，看到过，甚至感受到过一些什么样的关于企业家身份的言论或者信息？（比如，您曾经听到谁谁谁描述企业家活动）
 - a. 这些言论或信息怎样影响到了您（负面正面）？
7. 有哪些人鼓舞了您的职业的发展？那些人曾使您感到气馁？
8. 如果可以的话，请您描述一下您的家庭。
9. 您的家庭成员是怎样谈论您的事业和工作的？
 - a. 您是怎么知道这些评论的？或者您可以讲一个一次您听到这些谈论的故事。
 - b. 这些话题是怎么随时间而改变的？或者比如您事业有不同的时期，您的家人在不同的时期有哪些不同的评论呢？
 - c. 你的好朋友们是如何谈论您的工作和事业的呢？

10. 您如何理解家庭角色和家庭责任?
11. 您个人生活中最重要的人有些谁?
 - a. 他或他们对您的事业以及工作有过怎样的说法?
12. 您同您的同事下属员工以及其他集团内部成员关系如何?
13. 请讲述一次您感受到她/他们对您的爱戴和尊重的经历。
 - a. 您从 ta 们口中听到过何种对您的工作和为人的评价呢?
14. 在您职业发展或者在您参与到企业活动的过程中, 在哪些情况下您的性别身份会变得很明显 (或者甚至敏感)? (就是, 您的性别身份突然变得很关键的影响因素)。
 - a. 在哪些情况下您的性别身份和其他因素会联合作用 (比如年龄)?
15. 在您职业发展的过程中, 您曾遇到过何种与女性身份相关的挑战? 请讲述一些这样的经历。
16. 最后, 请想象您在同一群志在成为企业家的女性谈话, 您会像她们讲述怎样的故事? 又会给予她们什么样的建议?

Appendix C: Informed Consent



Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

Title: *Communicative Constitution of Women Entrepreneurs in China: Exploring their Organizational and Relational Lives*

Pro # 00040658

Overview: You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Zhenyu Tian, who is a doctoral student at/in University of South Florida. This person is called the Principal Investigator. He is being guided in this research by Dr. Patrice Buzzanell and Dr. Keith Berry. Other approved research staff may act on behalf of the Principal Investigator.

Study Details: The research will use face-to-face in-depth interviews and online video/audio (computer-mediated) phone interviews.

For face-to-face interviews, the PI plans to meet with some participants in person in their own city/region and a private, comfortable space of their choosing (e.g., home, private office).

Computer-mediated interviews will be conducted via WeChat (the most popular social media application in China) or other similar social media platforms, within the private space of each participant. Zhenyu will also be in his private residence when conducting the interviews.

The purpose of the study is to investigate (a) the competing discourses surrounding women entrepreneur in China; (b) how women entrepreneurs in China negotiate (and resist) gendered social discourses; (c) how entrepreneurship shape women entrepreneurs' relational lives; and (d) challenges facing women entrepreneurs in China as well as how they integrate and transform in challenging situations. The study will be based on in-depth interviews (one with each participant), each of which should last 45-90 minutes. Depending on progress of the research analysis, shorter follow-up interviews with some participants may also be used.

Participants: You are being asked to take part because you may see yourself as a woman entrepreneur, you are the owner of business or enterprise, and you are over the age of 21.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start.

Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: We do not know if you will receive any benefit from your participation. There is no cost to participate. You will not be compensated for your participation. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks you face in daily life.

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential.

Why are you being asked to take part?

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you may see yourself (and others may also see you) as a woman entrepreneur, you are the owner of business or enterprise, and you are over the age of 21. Therefore, your lived experience will illuminate the understandings of women entrepreneurs' lives and realities pertinent to the purpose of the study.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Answer questions the PI asks during an in-depth interview and possible shorter follow-up interviews. The questions pertain to your opinions and experiences about career, gender, relational lives, and organizational lives.
- The in-depth interview is expected to last between 45 and 90 minutes.
- Interviews will take place at your convenience, providing the PI is available. It is your choice to receive each interview either in person or on phone.
- Face-to-face, in person interviews will take place in a private setting that is convenient and comfortable to you.
- Utilizing the convenience of WeChat, interviews can be conducted on your computer or cellphone, in your personal residence, or wherever you feel comfortable.
- At the beginning of the interview, the PI will request permission from you to audio-record the conversation. You can decline giving permission to audio-record the interview. Only the PI will have access to this audio recording.

Total Number of Participants

55 individuals will take part in this study at all site.

Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

Benefits

We are unsure if you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study. However, the potential benefits of participating in this research study include:

an opportunity to reflect on past and present organizational experiences, as well as the opportunity to make sense of situations through the practice of storytelling. Additionally, participation will contribute to an academic area of interest that is relevant to many people's everyday lives, as well as the social waves of equality and equity.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Costs

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose, or this research does not involve parties in conflict regarding interests.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We will do our best to keep your records private and confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Certain people may need to see your study records. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisors.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes: the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, and staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Zhenyu Tian at +1 (619) 709-6577/+86 18684743618.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Consent to Take Part in Research

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

Date

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research participant speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research participant has provided legally effective informed consent.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Appendix D: Exempt Certification



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

May 20, 2019

Zhenyu Tian
Communication
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: Exempt Certification

IRB#: Pro00040658

Title: Communicative Constitution of Women Entrepreneurs in China: Exploring Their
Organizational and Relational Lives

Dear Mr. Tian:

On 5/19/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that your research meets criteria for exemption from the federal regulations as outlined by 45 CFR 46.104(d):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF HRPP policies and procedures.

Please note, as per USF HRPP Policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in ARC. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant an Amendment or new application.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Melissa Sloan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping loop at the top.

Melissa Sloan, PhD, Vice
Chairperson USF Institutional
Review Board

Appendix E: Recruitment Letter



Inviting Letter for a Voluntary Study

Pro # 00040658

Dear Ms. _____,

I am currently a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at University of South Florida.

I plan to conduct a research project that examines the relational and organizational lives of women entrepreneurs in China from a communicative perspective. The purpose of this study is to gain understanding of (a) the competing discourses surrounding women entrepreneur in China; (b) how women entrepreneurs in China negotiate (and resist) gendered social discourses; (c) how entrepreneurship shape women entrepreneurs' relational lives; and (d) challenges facing women entrepreneurs in China as well as how they integrate and transform in challenging situations.

This research will focus on the lived experience of people who have come to be women entrepreneurs in China. That is, it will be based on in-depth, dialogical interviews with individuals who identify with this population. You are thus recommended by Mr./Ms. _____ as a potential participant, and I would like to conduct *an* in-depth interview with you. The interview will center around your storied experiences of entrepreneurship and being a woman entrepreneur, which should last for 45-90 minutes. Depending on progress of the research analysis, shorter follow-up interviews may occur in the near future.

Your participation will be completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any point. If you are interested, please reply to me on WeChat, via E-mail (zhenyut@mail.usf.edu), or contact me via cell phone at +1 (619) 709-6577/+86 18684743618.

Thank you for your patience and support!

Sincerely,
Zhenyu Tian