



# INDIVIDUALIZATION AND MARKETIZATION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR GENDER EQUALITY: THE CASE OF FEMALE MANAGERS IN CHINA

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*This article investigates the question of where the responsibility for promoting gender equality resides in the Chinese employment context. Utilizing Acker's (2006) inequality regimes framework, the study explores women's underrepresentation in management roles in China and explains the persistence of gender inequalities in managerial echelons of Chinese organizations. Based on 30 interviews with female managers, the findings demonstrate the marketization and individualization of gender equality in organizational activity. The existing gender inequality, and the lack of responsibility for tackling it, has been either legitimized by eluding to the commercial-only focus of organizations or rendered invisible through a belief in individual choice as the determining factor of career progression for women. Gender inequality in management is also maintained through the compliance of female managers themselves with the presumed legitimacy of gender-based differential access to managerial roles. References to culture and tradition, market forces, competitive pressures, and individual choices by female managers are often made in explaining the unequal career paths and outcomes for men and women in their organizations. Our findings contribute to the human resource management (HRM) literature by framing macrosocietal context as a dynamic and endogenous aspect of management of human resources in organizations and provide novel insights into the interplay between HRM and societal context. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

*Keywords:* China, gender equality, diversity, legitimacy, inclusion, Confucianism, female managers, inequality regimes

**D**espite progress over the past decades in terms of female representation in management, top management in organizations continues to be dominated by men (Acker, 2006; Bilimoria, Joy, & Liang, 2008; Cook & Glass, 2014; Padavic & Reskin, 2002; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). There is a well-developed literature on the lack of equitable female representation in management in Western organizational contexts. Extant research

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showed how a variety of organizational, group, and individual level factors may act as opportunities and constraints in promoting gender equality at work (e.g., Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1992; Ragins & Kram, 2007; Vinkenburg, van Engen, Eagly, & Johnnesen-Schmidt, 2011). Such influences are also often situated in the wider cultural context. In this article, we recognize the multilevel and contextual nature of gender equality as explored in previous works, but we also emphasize the dynamic and emergent nature of this contextual embedded-

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ness. Instead of taking the macrosocietal context and cultural setting as a given, this article explores the changes in the legitimacy structures that promote or stifle gender equality efforts in organizations. In this way, our research endogenizes the sociocultural context as an integral aspect of human resource management (HRM), including the management of gender equality.

Our article aims to explore where the responsibility for promoting gender equality resides in Chinese employment contexts with a specific attention to managerial level representation of women. As Cooke (2013) pointed out, there are multiple influences on conditions of gender equality at work in China including state policies and organizational practices. Situated within the fast-changing political economy context of China, our findings demonstrate that organizational concern for addressing gender inequality is contextual, dynamic, and contingent. Utilizing Acker's (2006) inequality regimes framework and informed by 30 qualitative interviews, this article unpacks how gender inequality at the managerial level is perceived by female managers and consequently where

the responsibility for achieving gender equality is seen to be located. In discussing the findings of our study, we build on Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes to explain and explore persistent gender inequalities in managerial echelons of Chinese organizations. The findings of the present study evidence the importance of three components in Acker's (2006) framework (i.e., visibility, legitimacy, and control and compliance) in sustaining gender inequality as the status quo.

Our research makes a number of contributions to scholarly and practitioner knowledge.

This article presents original empirical data on women's managerial experiences in China. Despite China being the second-largest economy in the world, research on female managers in China is limited (with notable exceptions such as Cooke, 2005; Cooke & Xiao, 2014). Our findings make a significant theoretical contribution to the HRM literature by framing macrosocietal context as a dynamic and endogenous aspect of management of human resources in organizations. The importance of context in shaping HRM is well recognized (Beer, Lawrence, Mills, & Walton, 1985; Brewster, 1995; Fombrun, 1982; Tichy, Fombrun, & Devanna, 1982), yet the tendency is often to treat the context as background. Our findings show that the sociocultural context of gender equality is dynamic, and it feeds the legitimacy structures that inform the HRM practices (or the lack thereof) promoting gender equality in management. In exploring three key components of Acker's (2006) sociological framework in relation to experiences of Chinese female managers, we provide novel insights into the interplay between HRM and societal context. In addition, the evidence based theoretical expansion that is offered in this article has significant implications for human resource (HR) practitioners. Refocusing on the societal context as a constitutive element of gender equality in organizations enables us to approach the issue of female representation at the managerial level from an intrinsically embedded angle. This fresh approach allows us to revisit taken-for-granted HRM assumptions and solutions, extending the current thinking in designing HR policies and practices in the area of women in management.

The article is structured as follows: first, a contextually informed overview of female employment in Chinese organizations is provided. The next section presents the theory that informs the study, followed by the description of research methods. The findings of the research are presented and analyzed in three subsections focusing on (1) the state and organization, (2) market forces, and (3) individual female managers. The discussion that follows elucidates the research findings using Acker's (2006) concept of inequality regimes and explains how the responsibility for gender equality in management is understood and where it is located. Next, implications for HR practitioners are highlighted, and directions for future research are identified. The final section concludes the article.

### **Female Employment in the Chinese Context**

Women's position is subordinate to that of men in a range of life aspects in the Chinese society,

which has a culturally masculine orientation (Chen & Francesco, 2000; Cheng, Chan, & Leung, 2010; Han, 2000). A long-standing Confucian system of values and beliefs implicitly informs interactions between men and women (Li, 2000). The strict conception of a harmonized yin and yang binary hinges on the contrarily located forces being recognized as different and viewed as standing in mutually reinforcing posture toward one another (Faure & Fang, 2008; Li, 2008). A socially powerful extension of this construct of mutuality in terms of gender is the differentiated positions that men and women occupy in hierarchical relation to each other in the society. In the binary construction of gender roles, women are assigned the inferior role in different spheres of life including family and work domains (Banister, 2004; Das Gupta et al., 2003).

In this context, the male identity is exteriorized as existing mainly outside the bounds of the home domain as a force to conquer and tame an unruly external world, while women are interiorized, and as such tasked to hone their socially enculturated skills of nurture and care within the domesticity of the home environment (Cooke, 2005; Leung, 2003). While men are expected to be the main breadwinner and the primary driver of family fortunes, women are seen to occupy a functionary role serving to supplement family income through their participation in the labor market as they continue to be viewed first and foremost as the locus of household responsibilities as wife and mother (Cooke, 2005; Turner, 2006). The impact of patriarchal norms moves beyond acting as an organizing principle in social relations and seeps into systems and processes at work, with the Chinese HRM practices still reflecting Confucian values and beliefs (Cooke, 2012; Ngo, 2008; Warner, 2009).

Against this normative backdrop stands the vicissitudes of modern Chinese history with marked vacillations in political priorities and policy preferences in terms of gender issues, which had an influential role in shaping women's opportunities in the workplace. The command-driven economy period posed a challenge to the long-standing Confucian subjugation of women, as the Chinese state adopted an ideological posture that favored limited unemployment, which broadened women's access to labor markets (Cooke & Xiao, 2014). This economic imperative was coupled with a policy emphasis on holding citizens equal regardless of any identity-based differences including gender. As a result, gender-based prejudices and stereotypes became silenced, if not challenged or actively addressed. However, as the state's interventionist power and presence in the

marketplace started to wane in the aftermath of structural reforms toward a free market economy, gender-based prejudices have once again been rendered unchecked, leading discriminatory systems, processes, and attitudes in the workplace to resurface more explicitly, with women experiencing more blatant and ubiquitous instances of marginalization in the labor market (Cooke, 2001). The costs of the market reforms have been born disproportionately by women (Summerfield, 1994), with many more women than men having been made redundant during the period of liberalization (Liu, 2007) as well as a widening gender pay gap (Braunstein & Brenner, 2007). With the diminishing role of the state in advocating gender equality, women have experienced a decline in job mobility (Cao & Hu, 2007), while gender segregation by industry has noticeably increased in the post-reform era (Shu, 2005). Although the official rhetoric still evokes the figurative casting of women as holding up half the sky, research shows that female employees and managers experience widespread devaluation and discrimination (Bowen, Wu, Hwang, & Scherer, 2007; Granrose, 2005; Han, 2000; Maurer-Fazio, Rawski, & Zhang, 1999). As Woodhams, Lupton, and Xian (2009) found, traditional gender norms and expectations have a strong influence on recruitment and selection processes.

The current work context in China displays entrenched gender inequalities. This is reflected in a plethora of negative social regularities, such as disproportionate expectations for women to reconcile household and work tasks (Aaltio & Huang, 2007; Xiao & Cooke, 2012), persistent gender-based earnings differentials (Chi & Li, 2008), sex typing of jobs (Peng, Ngo, Shi, & Wong, 2009), women's underrepresentation in managerial posts due to biased promotional criteria and relative limits on women's access to intra- and extraorganizational career networks and social capital (Cooke, 2009), and negative attitudes by male supervisors against women managers (Liu, Comer, & Dubinsky, 2001). Taken together, such constraints have a limiting impact on progression of women into managerial ranks. Consequently, women continue to be underrepresented in management despite their comparable skills and educational achievements (Aaltio & Huang, 2007; Tatli, Vassilopoulou, & Özbilgin, 2013).

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## Theoretical Backdrop

The research on women in management is now an established area of inquiry. Kanter's (1977) work on gender representation in organizations is arguably the path-breaking study in terms of how women's disadvantage in organizations is discussed and conceptualized. In her study, Kanter (1977) found that numerical representation in work groups has a significant impact on how majority versus minority group members are perceived. Specifically, tokenism emerges as a defining feature of the career experience of women in managerial echelons where they are the minority and as such have increased visibility in the organizational landscape. The visibility associated with the scarcity of the managerial positions occupied

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by women leads to a number of negative consequences for women's career aspirations including raised expectations of performance and gendered perception of success and failure. Furthermore, group relations and organizational culture are shaped by the group with the numerical dominance—in this case, male managers. Consequently, the token women do not only have increased visibility but they are often marginalized and expected to perform in accordance with the standards of the dominant culture, which often imposes gendered stereotypes (Kanter, 1977).

In the years that followed, the research on women managers produced findings that are consistent with Kanter's (1977) assertions. Among the factors that are cited as notable in shaping female presence at the management level are informal networks (Brass, 1985), glass ceiling (Morrison et al., 1992), gender-based stereotypes (Vinkenburg et al., 2011), long-hours culture (Simpson, 1998), differential mentoring (McDonald & Westphal, 2013; Ragins & Kram, 2007) and leadership development (Ely et al., 2011), gendered perceptions of performance and promotability (Roth, Purvis, & Bobko, 2012), and limited provision of work-life balance policies such as flexible working, career breaks, and child care support (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Furthermore, others have taken a system-based approach in understanding gendered organizations. In their influential work, Ridgeway and Correll (2004) argued that while the gender system is conditioned by deep inequalities

based on constructed rather than real differences, gender's effective salience varies across different contexts. Gender becomes most salient in contexts where men and women heavily interact, and the gender associated with one sex category is ascribed superior properties and capabilities that make them more "appropriate" for the accomplishment of primary pursuits in that context. Workplaces are social spaces with high gender salience because male and female employees interact and increasingly compete at work, especially with women's greater participation in the labor force in both developing and advanced economies. Yet a wide plethora of work tasks, duties, and roles continue to be traditionally tied to stereotypical male-centric capabilities and skills. Supervisors, peers, and subordinates, often of both genders, routinely hold stereotypical beliefs that paint male workers as rational, competent, physically and analytically superior doers, whereas women are constructed as emotional, nurturing, communicative supporters, which perpetuates gender as a social system of difference and inequality (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

What emerges from the literature on gender and work is the multiplicity and diversity of mechanisms that lead to unequal gender outcomes. In navigating the complex terrain of women's underrepresentation in management, our article makes use of Acker's (2006) concept of inequality regimes. Acker's work has a significant explanatory power in delineating multiple factors that contribute to gender inequality in organizations. Acker (2006, p. 443) defines inequality regimes as a corpus of "loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings" that lead to and perpetuate a variety of inequalities in organizations, including gender inequality. Organizational inequality regimes are contextual in that they are informed by the prevailing social, cultural, political, and economic setting. Inequality regimes are also historical in that they are shaped by the established traditions and routines in organizations and wider society. Acknowledging the role of history and context is particularly important in exploring the managerial experiences of women in the societal context of China, which is deeply influenced by a long-standing tradition of Confucianism that colors relations between the sexes at work and home (Leung, 2003). Acker (2006, p. 444) conceptualizes inequality regimes across six main components: "the bases of inequality, the shape and degree of inequality, organizing processes that create and recreate inequalities, the invisibility of inequalities, the legitimacy of inequalities, and the controls that prevent protest against inequalities." The first three components of inequality regimes particularly focus on the organizational processes

and structures that give rise to what kind of inequalities are experienced, by whom, and to what extent. In contrast, the latter three components move beyond organization specific aspects to encompass contextual and historical factors.

Our key line of inquiry in this article is to understand where the responsibility for achieving gender equality in management is located in Chinese organizations. Therefore, the last three components of the inequality regimes framework, that is, invisibility of inequalities, legitimacy of inequalities, and control and compliance, are of particular benefit in orienting the discussion of our findings. Acker (2006) defines visibility of inequalities based on the extent to which awareness for inequality exists within the organization. In Acker's (2006) view gender inequality often becomes invisible in organizations because it is legitimized through a number of mechanisms that naturalize and normalize inequality. The legitimacy of organizational inequalities is also informed by dominant political ideologies as well as wider social and economic conditions. For instance, Acker (2006) argues, legislation and regulation in the area of equality, diversity, and inclusion may weaken the entrenched legitimacy of inequality. However, deep-seated inequalities legitimized through the process of naturalization and normalization of gender-based hierarchies are harder to tackle. The mechanisms of control and compliance are key in upholding the legitimacy of gender inequalities. Due to the naturalized and normalized assumptions that create a gender hierarchy, workers and managers fail to question the legitimacy of inequalities, which become invisible to them (Acker, 2006). In sum, three dimensions of inequality regimes offer valuable analytical insights in our study as we elaborate in the discussion section.

## Methods

The primary data for this study were collected through 30 interviews with women in middle and senior management roles in private companies operating in a range of industries in China. Interviews were conducted in two rounds: 20 interviews in 2013, and 10 interviews in 2014. A qualitative interviewing approach is particularly suitable for explorative studies that aim to generate rich insights into previously understudied issues and contexts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). We have used a semistructured interviewing technique because it offers a reasonable balance between flexibility and spontaneity, on the one hand, and focus and structure, on the other hand (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

The challenges of gaining access to research participants in China are well recognized in the

literature (Cooke & Xiao, 2014; Stening & Zhang, 2007). Qualitative field research in the Chinese context is prone to cross-cultural constraints, with potential interviewees often valuing diffidence and actively eschewing openness with strangers (Shenkar, 1994). This necessitated the use of gatekeepers and author networks, which involved a degree of convenience to be introduced into the initial stages of the sampling strategy (see Tu, Forret, & Sullivan, 2006). However, the convenience approach was informed by selection criteria in line with the research aims and objectives. Therefore, we specifically asked our colleagues to direct us to female managers in middle and senior management positions in Chinese organizations operating in a variety of industries. Once the first few interviews were conducted, we used snowball sampling to access further chains of participants through referrals. Participants were assured of full anonymity and confidentiality, which helped build trust and openness. Interviews were conducted in locations preferred by interviewees, which ranged from offices to a hotel lobby to a participant home, among others. The interviews, which had a semistructured format, lasted approximately an hour in length. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

The interview questions were broad in their range and scope, delving into the backgrounds of the participants, the nature of their career courses and experiences, obstacles and challenges encountered as managers, and participants' approach to managerial work. Our questions aimed to probe deep into the participants' understandings of their managerial experiences with a view toward exploring both personal meaning and perception of social and organizational context. The interview guide allowed flexibility and space for participants to bring in their perspectives and experiences as female managers. In qualitative research, which is based on the interaction between the researcher and participants, reflexivity is a key issue because researcher bias may potentially shape the data collection process. During the data collection process, we as researchers engaged in what Bourdieu (1999) calls active and methodical listening, by being actively mindful of preconceptions that we might have inadvertently brought into the research process due to our positions as gender equality researchers. As the data collection and analysis processes were not an exercise of confirming an existing theory

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but aimed at exploring the interplay between gender and managerial experiences, semistructured interviewing allowed participants to introduce and share issues that they see important for their careers.

All research participants worked full-time in managerial roles in private sector organizations in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province in Central China. Due to China's expansive geography, we decided to limit the field research to one location to optimize cost and time investment. Not only does Wuhan have a robust and thriving economy but also the choice of this particular

location allowed us to tap into already existing personal and professional networks for effective data collection. Our sample included representation from a wide range of industries including retail, IT, education, hospitality, real estate, manufacturing, and finance. The age range of the participants was from 27 to 40. The demographic attributes of the interviewees are presented in Table I.

Our analytical efforts centered on conventional qualitative analysis that involves open coding followed by identification of emergent themes (Strauss, 1987). The open coding approach was particularly useful in this study to prevent bias and

**TABLE I** Interviewee Background Characteristics

Participants	Industry	Length of Tenure	Education	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children
1	Manufacturing	11 years	Professional diploma	29	Single	None
2	Education	6 months	Bachelor's	35	Married	1
3	Hospitality	4 years	Bachelor's	30	Married	1
4	Real Estate	2 years	Master's	34	Married	None
5	Retail	3 years	Bachelor's	32	Single	None
6	Hospitality	4 years	No formal qualifications	40	Married	1
7	Manufacturing	2 years	Bachelor's	31	Single	None
8	Finance	5 years	Bachelor's	27	Single	None
9	Retail	1.5 years	Master's	33	Married	1
10	Hospitality	1 year	Professional diploma	38	Divorced	1
11	IT	4 years	Master's	32	Single	None
12	IT	5 years	Master's	31	Married	1
13	Hospitality	5 years	Bachelor's	27	Single	None
14	Retail	2 years	No formal qualifications	29	Divorced	None
15	Health Care	17 years	Bachelor's	40	Married	1
16	Finance	6 years	Bachelor's	29	Married	1
17	Manufacturing	2 years	Master's	27	Single	None
18	Retail	6 months	Bachelor's	29	Single	None
19	Real estate	5 years	Bachelor's	36	Married	1
20	Marketing	5 years	Bachelor's	30	Married	None
21	IT	2 years	Master's	31	Married	None
22	Marketing	1 year	Master's	33	Married	1
23	Retail	2 years	Diploma	31	Married	1
24	Hospitality	3 years	No formal qualifications	29	Divorced	None
25	Finance	2 years	Master's	32	Married	1
26	Manufacturing	3 years	Master's	36	Married	None
27	Retail	1 year	Master's	28	Married	1
28	Education	3 years	Master's	37	Married	1
29	Utilities	2 years	Master's	30	Divorced	None
30	Marketing	2 years	Master's	31	Single	None

preconceptions that may be unintentionally introduced by researchers, as it allows codes and themes to emerge from the data rather than forcing the data into pre-established categories, codes, and themes. Authors A and B have independently carried out open coding of the interview data through a close and iterative reading of the transcribed material. At the outset of the coding process, the coders agreed to focus on opportunities and constraints faced by female managers, their career experiences and their perceptions and interpretations of these experiences; and examples of gender inequalities. Once each coder had drawn a list of codes from the data, they met to compare and contrast the open codes identified in the segments of interview texts. While the specific wording might have diverged, there was a strong correspondence between the open codes identified by Authors A and B. The next stage was to remove repetition and to agree on a condensed set of codes that reflected the initial open codes. The final stage involved abstraction from the open codes using a thematic approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where we grouped and

categorized the agreed codes into three emergent themes (see Table II).

To safeguard against analytical and theory-based bias, we employed a graduate student, who is not familiar with specific gender theories utilized in the article, and who then was given access to the interview transcripts and asked to independently code the data. We instructed the coder to identify significant segments (e.g., sentences, phrases) of the transcribed material through an open coding approach. Once the independent coder arrived at new open codes (Table III), the authors of the article compared the previously agreed codes with the new open codes, identifying similarities and differences. Following Graebner (2009), our analytical approach had a dynamic focus, which enabled us to engage in an iterative process of data analysis by going back and forth between the interview quotes and the emergent codes. The iterative approach guided our analytical process equally at both the initial stage of two coders and the later enhanced stage, which introduced a third independent coder.

**TABLE II** Open Codes Identified by Authors A and B, and Emergent Themes

Author A's Codes	Author B's Codes	Agreed Codes	Emergent Themes
Structural change Economic transition Communism vs. capitalism Modernization Gender sorting of jobs Right person for the job Profit maximization	Liberalization The (Communist) Party Regulatory erosion Gender neutrality Skills Tradition Occupational segregation	Economic and social transition Planned vs. free market economy Meritocracy Gendered typing of jobs and segregation Regulatory erosion Gender blindness	<i>The state, organization, and gender equality</i>
Intensity of rivalry Supply and demand constraints on equality Commerce as first priority Performance Client preferences Organization as followers of the markets' will	Competition Utilitarian market logic Customer beliefs/ expectations Wealth accumulation Supposed incompatibility of equality and markets Technical barriers Equality as a never- ending project	Intensity of competition Utilitarianism Gendered customer beliefs/ expectations Assumed incompatibility of equality and markets Gendered technical barriers to equality Supremacy of market forces	<i>Market forces and gender equality</i>
Women as sole determinants of their success Opportunity for all Personal career planning Job mobility Gendered attributes of management	Gender imbalance Promotion Work-life balance Gender stereotypes Career stagnation Lack of ambition	Equality of opportunity Work-life balance Individualized approach to career success Gendered job mobility prospects Choice-based framing of career outcomes	<i>Individual female managers and gender equality</i>

**TABLE III** Open Codes Identified by the Independent Coder, Consolidated Themes, and Illustrative Quotes

Open Codes	Consolidated Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Merit New industries Communism Liberalization	<i>The state, organization, and gender equality</i>	"Men and women are treated equally, in the eyes of the party.... Why some companies employ women in some jobs and not men, it has a lot to do with the interaction these employees have with the customers. All companies, even the state-owned companies, want to make profit."
Supply/demand Technology Clients/customers Biological differences/capability	<i>Market forces and gender equality</i>	"I will be stupid to employ only men, if I know women can sell more. The company will be stupid to employ only women in development if people feel safer with men in that area, or only women in legal department if the legal process is mainly men."
Informal networks Work-life Success and failure as individual choice Coping strategies	<i>Individual female managers and gender equality</i>	"The company has been very generous to me. It is fine that they do not pay me; they have given me something more precious, which is time. I am happy without being paid and this is fine. I don't think I should be paid. I did not get sick; I was pregnant with a baby. You don't choose to be sick; you choose to have a baby. I had a choice; I chose to have a baby. I was not forced to have a baby by my family; it was a choice I could make. So I don't see why the company need to support me more than allowing me to take so much time off."
Conventions/beliefs reinforcing gender difference Strict gender binaries Acceptance of gendered beliefs and divisions Male breadwinner ideology Confucianism	<i>Culture, tradition, and gender equality</i>	"The traditional culture in China is that women's place is in the home looking after her husband and child, even after so many years of communist rule. I believe it is commonly found in many organizations that a woman will face such difficulties and be given jobs where she can go home and look after her family, jobs that are not very challenging or with a good future."

To systematically check for intercoder agreement, we carried out further tests using a randomly preselected range of segments from the transcribed material amounting to approximately 10% of the data. Intercoder agreement was checked both in the first and second rounds of the coding exercise. In the first round that involved open coding by Authors A and B, selected data segments were scrutinized to assess the degree of consistency in coding between the authors. The comparative evaluation of independently coded segments yielded high level of intercoder agreement (79 out of 90 segments). The same procedure was then repeated to check the intercoder agreement between the codes agreed by Authors A and B, and the new open codes by the independent coder. The level of intercoder agreement at this stage was still high (68 out of 90 segments) but lower than the intercoder agreement observed in the first round. This difference was due to an emergence of a new theme in this second iteration of coding. The independent coding exercise

enabled us to identify a number of new codes and a new emergent theme. The majority of new codes corresponded to the three themes that were previously agreed in the first round of coding and thematic analysis (i.e., state and organizations; market forces; individual female managers). However, there were a number of additional open codes, which pointed out the presence of a fourth theme. These included gendered conventions or beliefs, gender binaries, male breadwinner ideology, gender unequal tradition, and Confucianism. We assigned these codes into a new emergent theme (i.e., culture and tradition), which cuts across all three emergent themes previously agreed by authors A and B. The addition of the overarching theme enabled us to develop our analysis in a way to better integrate the specific cultural and social coordinates of gender inequality in the Chinese context. Table IV presents consolidated codes and themes that resulted from two rounds of open coding exercise and identification of agreed codes and themes. This multistage coding exercise led

**TABLE IV Consolidated Codes and Themes Integrating Coding by Authors A and B and Independent Coder**

	Consolidated Themes		
	The State, Organization	Market Forces	Individual Female Managers
<p><b>Consolidated Codes</b> →</p> <p>↓</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic and social transition</li> <li>• Planned vs. free market economy</li> <li>• Meritocracy</li> <li>• Gendered typing of jobs and segregation</li> <li>• Regulatory erosion</li> <li>• Gender blindness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensity of competition</li> <li>• Utilitarianism</li> <li>• Gendered customer beliefs/expectations</li> <li>• Assumed incompatibility of equality and markets</li> <li>• Gendered technical barriers to equality</li> <li>• Supremacy of market forces</li> <li>• Biological differences/capability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality of opportunity</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Coping strategies</li> <li>• Individualized approach to career success</li> <li>• Gendered job mobility prospects</li> <li>• Choice-based framing of career outcomes</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confucianism</li> <li>• Strong gendered tradition</li> <li>• Gender-based culture</li> <li>• Hierarchical gender roles and expectations</li> </ul>	<p><i>Culture and tradition</i></p>		
<p><b>Overarching consolidated theme</b></p>			

us to our key themes, which were then utilized to present and discuss our findings.

**Findings and Analysis**

In the sections that follow, we explore the interview data to understand the respondents’ perceptions of whose remit it is to achieve gender equality at work, with special reference to gender representation in management. This part is structured in the three headings corresponding to the emergent themes identified in the analysis of the data. Table V demonstrates the presence of these themes in interview accounts.

As can be seen in the table, in a remarkable majority of the interviews (i.e., 27 out of 30 interviews), the participants alluded to individual circumstances in making sense of unequal gender representation at managerial level. Explanations and examples involving factors related to state and organizations (i.e., 22 out of 30) and external market forces (i.e., 20 out of 30) also had significant presence in interviewee accounts. The relatively greater referencing of individual circumstances compared to the influence of the state, organizations, and market forces is not surprising as the personal experiences form the readily available stock of knowledge for the interviewees in making sense of the gender-based

reality around them. In addition to these three themes, our analysis identified culture and tradition as an overarching theme that colors the other three emergent themes and was present in all interviews. In the following sections, we explore participants’ accounts of gender inequality in relation to key influences in the Chinese employment sphere across the themes of (1) state and organizations, (2) market forces, and (3) individual female managers, while the analysis of the fourth theme, culture and tradition, runs through these three themes.

***The State, Organization, and Gender Equality***

The structural shift in the Chinese economic order toward market orientation led to an expansion of gender inequalities and at the same time potentially opened up new avenues for women’s career progression (Cooke & Xiao, 2014). Our respondents frequently noted the effects of the changes in the economic structure in China on perceptions of and attitudes toward gender equality in employment sphere. They often drew

*We explore the interview data to understand the respondents’ perceptions of whose remit it is to achieve gender equality at work, with special reference to gender representation in management*

**TABLE V** Mention of Multiple Influences on Responsibility for Gender Equality in Interviewee Accounts

Inter- viewees	State, Organization, and Gender Equality Nexus	Market Forces and Gender Equality Nexus	Individual and Gender Equality Nexus
P1	✓		✓
P2	✓	✓	
P3	✓	✓	✓
P4		✓	✓
P5	✓	✓	
P6	✓	✓	✓
P7	✓		✓
P8		✓	✓
P9		✓	✓
P10	✓	✓	✓
P11	✓		✓
P12	✓		✓
P13		✓	✓
P14	✓		✓
P15	✓		✓
P16	✓	✓	✓
P17		✓	✓
P18	✓	✓	
P19	✓	✓	✓
P20	✓		✓
P21		✓	✓
P22	✓		✓
P23	✓	✓	✓
P24		✓	✓
P25	✓		✓
P26	✓		✓
P27	✓	✓	✓
P28	✓	✓	✓
P29		✓	✓
P30	✓	✓	✓
Total	22 (73%)	20 (67%)	27 (90%)

linkages between the move from communist to capitalist market logic and the declining emphasis on gender equality. One participant told us:

In China, we have had many years of equality in the workplace. You may have heard about the term *comrade* that we used to call each other ... Not Mr. Comrade or Mrs. Comrade. Just comrade... But there are certain qualities that are different between men and women, apart from the obvious physical appearance. ... Why some companies employ women in some jobs and not men, it has a lot to do with the interaction these employees have with the customers. All companies, even the state-owned companies, want to make profit. (P5, Retail)

This participant's words not only indicate the significance of the shift in the political economic paradigm but also highlight that the new profit oriented market logic confers legitimacy upon organizational practices based on traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Another respondent thought that the gender equality principle of the Communist Party has not led to the transformation of gender relations due to the strength of the long-standing cultural constructs of gender hierarchy:

This is what the party said, we are comrades, we are the same. But culture is stronger than the party, so little changed. In China, women always have lower status than men. Change is difficult. Even now, people say a woman should be at home. But women have been out working. But now, there are factories started by young people not influenced by culture. No, they are only a little influenced by culture, more influenced by money. ... So these people will give opportunities to anyone who can make them money. (P1, Manufacturing)

The words of this interviewee highlight the changes as a result of the liberalization of the Chinese economy. Economic liberalization and the state's vacation of its regulatory role led to the "privatization" (Colling & Dickens, 1998, p. 391) of the responsibility for achieving equality in Chinese workplaces. In contrast to the allegedly gender-free discourse imposed by the planned economy, the current discourse and practice are oriented toward profit making, and employees are chosen according to their presumed contribution to profit maximization. One respondent explained how the competitive pressures required the company to select the best-suited person for the job: "The company knows it has to be competitive, so there is no time for people who are not helpful in the company" (P26, Manufacturing). Coupled

with the growing recognition of skill shortages in the Chinese labor market (Cai, 2013), the increasingly competitive business environment in which companies operate may potentially open up avenues for improvements to gender representation in management. However, conceptions of suitability, talent, and potential continue to be colored by the traditional gender ideology. Freed from the necessity to adopt a gender free stance, the organizational recruitment, selection, and promotion processes are now often explicitly based on gendering of job roles, competencies, and career trajectories. Yet respondents also indicated that under rising competition and global standardization of managerial practices, there is a pressure on Chinese firms toward recognizing female talent, particularly in newly emergent industries:

You also have to look at the type of industry or company. In some of the very traditional companies, you will find more male managers. But increasingly, in the younger industries, you will find a good balance, and you will find that people are recruited and are promoted because they are qualified and can add to the company.... I feel that in a modern organization like my company, promotion must be based on merit. (P12, IT)

There was a commonly held belief among our participants that modernization of the economy led to meritocratic hiring practices particularly in new industries. Despite the positive portrayal of the change that is occurring in certain industries, we still see that traditional gender ideology seeps into the market-oriented logic of organizational activity that presumably is based on the recognition of merit of individual employees. In that logic, organizations engage with their employees individually on the basis of their talent and contribution, independent of any collective group-based identity including gender. However, our interviews clearly demonstrated that the conception of merit in organizations was based on gendered criteria determining who is right for which job role. As Acker (1990, 2006) argues, an ideal worker in organizations is constructed in the image of a male worker. This unspoken assumption then informs the structuration of the working time as well as job roles and expectations, consistently disadvantaging female workers. Overall, our findings suggest that in the context of the market-oriented shift, neither state nor organizations were seen to hold responsibility over ensuring equal gender representation in management and in wider organizational life. Our interviewees also mentioned the influence of market forces

outside of the organization in rendering the organizations' role peripheral in promoting gender equality, as we further explore in the next section.

### *Market Forces and Gender Equality*

During the interviews, the majority of research participants spoke of extra organizational market forces as a critical factor that accounts for the lack of organizational action in addressing gender inequality challenges. Gender inequality was often legitimized by frequent references to gendered customer beliefs and expectations as well as supply and demand conditions. For example, one respondent argued that customers shape the recruitment policies and practices of firms:

We need to sell. Who to? Customers.... The customers determine the way to sell. So, you see, it is the customers who control this. Now, if I want to sell you a pen, I will have a woman sell you a pen. To do this, I need to employ a woman sales person. So, you see, you determine who I can employ so that I can sell more. So, you see, you set the equality question. (P5, Retail)

As apparent from the words of this interviewee, the companies are absolved of responsibility to ensure equality and fairness. Instead, they are depicted as passive implementers of their customers' will. Interestingly, companies' assumptions of what the customers might expect and who the customers are informed by the traditional gender roles and discourses. Technical barriers were also mentioned as a reasonable basis for exclusion of women from undertaking certain jobs and tasks. For example, an interviewee argued that an extraorganizational factor such as technology presents a legitimate reason for occupational gender segregation:

Companies have to be professional, have to realize that they need the best people for the job. For example, there are very few, actually none that I know of, women truck drivers. It is difficult for women to drive those big vehicles. (P18, Retail)

Cockburn (1983, 1985) noted the male dominant nature of technology as exemplified by

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*The increasingly competitive business environment in which companies operate may potentially open up avenues for improvements to gender representation in management. However, conceptions of suitability, talent, and potential continue to be colored by the traditional gender ideology.*

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various work machines, vehicles, and tools, which are designed by men with male workers as users in mind. Consequently, choices with regards to supply and demand of work-related machinery represent gendered assumptions and expectations (Wajcman, 2002). According to our interviewee, technologies oriented around the male body served as an insurmountable barrier to gender equality, involving a range of stakeholders who have to act in tandem to resolve an issue that is not viewed as a priority or an area of concern for them.

To be equal in this example, the truck manufacturers will need to build different trucks. This will cost a lot of money, and the people who buy these trucks will pay more, and they will charge their customers more. All of this just so that

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*Achieving equality may be seen as a convoluted and never-ending project, which is economically unviable and perhaps even beyond the reach and capabilities of a commercial organization.*

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more women can drive trucks. Maybe I don't want to pay more for the transportation. Maybe, the transport companies don't want to pay more for the trucks. Maybe the trucks companies don't want to spend more to build different trucks. Maybe women don't want to drive trucks. Where do we start and where do we end? This equality issue is a very difficult issue to deal with. (P18, Retail)

As this respondent's words illustrate, achieving equality may be seen as a convoluted and never-ending project, which is economically unviable and perhaps even beyond the reach and capabilities of a commercial organization. Located in a fast-paced marketplace marked by intense competition, organizations' view of women managers is depicted as pivoting around utilitarian terms that reduce female workers to a productive cog in the efficient machinery of company wealth accumulation. One striking example among others, which showcased women's use-value-oriented positioning in the marketization logic, related to the decision of pregnancy, as explicated by one of our interviewees: "If no staff gets pregnant that would be ideal for our business, but it is also a very happy situation when someone gets pregnant" (P28, Education). In explaining this view further, the same interviewee argued that in some jobs such as those involving client management, time off from work will affect organizational performance negatively: "... being away means the women will lose their clients, perhaps commission, and

perhaps repeat business." In this logic, the ideal situation for a commercial organization is where the employees are free from domestic entanglements including pregnancy. However, in case life and family demands conflict with work demands, employees are left to their own devices to resolve the conflict as explored in the next section. Nevertheless, there was a general sense among interviewees that organizational remit is principally commercial and does not encompass promotion of equality. In this market-oriented logic, we observe the individualization of the responsibility for gender equality.

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### *Individual Female Managers and Gender Equality*

The view that organizations are not responsible to achieve equality goals, coupled with the declining role of the state as a strong enforcer of gender equality (Cooke, 2005), results in the placement of the burden for ensuring equality outcomes on individual women. The perception that women are the sole determinant of their access to managerial posts is exemplified in the following quotations:

Some women may choose not to work, that is their choice. Some may choose to work regular hour jobs. That is their choice. (P12, IT)

I think China gives opportunities for anyone to succeed, and to fail. It is up to us to take the opportunity. (P13, Hospitality)

As apparent from the quotations above, career development for female managers was framed as a matter of individual choice and ambition. There was a common feeling that opportunities for managerial careers are available, and women's choices are the reason behind underrepresentation of women in management. The individualization of gender equality outcomes served to mask structural barriers faced by female managers and hid the gender imbalances permeating the organizational sphere. In framing the unequal gender representation in management as the outcome of personal career choices, our respondents stopped short of questioning gender-based disadvantage and privilege at work. Lack of ambition is often referred to as the main reason for women's limited presence in managerial ranks:

I see more men managers than women. But this is not bank policy, because I also know many women workers who don't apply for promotion because it will mean more responsibilities, more hours, and they need to look after their family, or

maybe they are not ambitious enough.  
(P16, Finance)

Lack of ambition was a repeated theme during the interviews to explain women's choices to not go for managerial posts. At the same time, the interview evidence indicates the presence of a catch-22 situation, in which women are hampered in the alternative scenarios where they show career ambition. A respondent explained that individual behaviors are perceived through a gendered lens based on the traditional expectations from men and women. For example, career ambition and job mobility to enhance career outcomes are very differently interpreted depending on one's gender:

I say most managers are, most with "manager" in their name card, are men. Men can get a senior job easier. Men can move jobs and people just say they are ambitious and they want something better. When they apply for another job, that new place just says he is very good to think of improving himself. When a woman applies for a different job, people say she does this because she is about to lose her job, that she is not good. (P1, Manufacturing)

In the employment context colored by strict gender hierarchies, roles, and expectations, men and women are ascribed different motives for very similar behaviors. Consequently, women acting in a presumably ambitious manner are potentially met with suspicion with regards to their intentions, skills, and competencies. Despite the evidence of gender-based presumptions, which potentially lead to less favorable career outcomes for female managers, gender inequality remains hidden due to an individualistic perspective, which persistently attributes career success to personal actions and preferences. In such a scenario, structural barriers stemming from gendered cultures and work practices become invisible. The area of work-life balance was a prominent example of how gender-related barriers are hidden and the responsibility to achieve gender balance in management is individualized. In all interviews, there was evidence of conflict between the spheres of work and life and family, which female managers conceived as a personal duty to resolve.

Interviewees often referred to traditional gender norms and expectations in explaining the challenges of managerial career progression and work-life conflict female managers experience. One of the participants referring to societal expectations that view men as the main breadwinner

and women as peripheral participants in the workplace asked: "How can Chinese women come out of this tradition or pressure from society?" (P12, IT). The solution she offered was for individual women to learn to ignore the societal expectations and pressures. She, however, fell short of imagining societal or organizational change that may alter the gendered division of labor, which is at the root of work-life conflict. Other respondents also highlighted the influence of strict division of labor between the sexes on career outcomes for women. Deep-seated Confucian tradition still informs the role and place of women in the Chinese society and has a strong influence on how women are perceived and self-perceive their suitability for management roles (Cooke, 2005, 2012). Backed by a strong historical tradition of Confucianism, the gender system is seen as unchangeable. In fact, the perceived immutability of the existing gender role divisions was a key theme in the interviews and as a result women were expected to cope with their individual strategies and choices. The lack of work-life balance provisions constituted a significant barrier to women's career progression. Xiao and Cooke (2012) similarly found that organizations lacked effective work-life balance policies and did not perceive this as a critical issue that needs to be addressed. In the absence of organizational support, female managers learn to develop personal coping strategies to balance the demands of work and life. When asked about work-life balance provisions in Chinese companies, one participant responded:

You mean working from home?

This is not possible unless they have their own business as working from home is not a common practice in China. Part-time work is also not a common practice, even with international companies. (P21, IT)

Similarly, another respondent told us that her organization does not have formal work-life balance policies such as childcare facilities or flexible work opportunities. However, she encouraged the female staff to devise their own informal solutions: "(my organization) does not have a regulation to support this. I have tried to support them another way, for example, I have tried to encourage them to organize common child care" (P15,

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*Gender inequality remains hidden due to an individualistic perspective, which persistently attributes career success to personal actions and preferences. In such a scenario, structural barriers stemming from gendered cultures and work practices become invisible.*

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Health Care). In the absence of organizational responsibility for gender equality, female managers have to devise individual solutions using their networks and resources inside and outside of the workplace. These strategies include getting help from relatives such as mothers-in-law, taking a career break, or setting up a sole trader business to accommodate childcare and work requirements. Conversely, some participants believed that the lack of work-life balance policies does not constitute a problem of equality. For example, when we

*Female managers face significant barriers in their career progression because both societal and organizational expectations reflect the male standard. Despite the evidence of unequal gender roles both at work and at home, which constitute structural constraints for career development, women's career outcomes are explained with reference to individual choice.*

asked a respondent who took a nine-month maternity leave, whether the leave was paid, she replied: "No, why should I be paid for not working?" (P25, Finance). Another interviewee, who did not receive pay during her maternity leave believed her company to be very supportive as she was offered her original post after returning from unpaid maternity leave. These examples show that work-life balance support is very limited in organizations, and female managers do not have expectations for work-life balance provisions from their organizations. In fact, work-life conflict is framed as a personal issue arising from life decisions and choices of individual women and as such should not be the concern of organizations. One participant argued that if women want equality they should not ask for special treatment or any targeted provisions:

Women have always wanted to be treated equally, so we should accept the equal work and the equal requirements that come with the work. And then we need to look at how to manage the family responsibilities. (P11, IT)

In this view, domestic responsibilities are seen as the private responsibility of individual workers and thought to be irrelevant to organizations. However, this logic ignores the unequal division of domestic responsibilities between the sexes as well as the organization of working time and structures according to the life styles of male workers, who are largely free from domestic burdens. As Acker (2006) argues, male-based structuration of organizational life is an important building block in the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace. Our research demonstrates that female managers

face significant barriers in their career progression because both societal and organizational expectations reflect the male standard. Despite the evidence of unequal gender roles both at work and at home, which constitute structural constraints for career development, women's career outcomes are explained with reference to individual choice. The issue of gender inequality is not only individualized but it is also deemed beyond the scope of commercial organizations.

## Discussion

This article highlights that female managers in China face strong barriers in organizational life. The study results show that gender inequality in management stretches across different economic periods in the country. In other words, gender-based obstacles to women's managerial advancement had been present during the command-driven state economy period as well as during the present era of market liberalization. However, there is a shift in perspective as to whether and how gender inequalities are recognized as a societal and organizational issue to be tackled, that is, where the responsibility for ensuring gender equality is located. During the state-controlled era, gender equality was the espoused goal of the state labor market policy (Cooke & Xiao, 2014), and it was pursued by adopting a position of presumed gender neutrality, which disregarded gender in recruitment policies and employment decisions of state organizations. One of the outcomes of liberal approaches to gender equality based on the idea of sameness and neutrality is to ignore the effects of historical and structural gender inequalities (Liff & Wajcman, 1996), which in the context of the socialist state policy meant not addressing the gender-based historical disadvantage. With the shift from state-controlled economy to the competitive market system, the frame of reference in how gender inequality is viewed has also shifted, although underrepresentation of women in managerial roles in Chinese organizations has continued to persist. The shift toward the free market economy has led to the marketization and individualization of the responsibility for gender equality at work.

In this section, we turn to Acker's (2006) theory of inequality regimes to understand how marketization and individualization of responsibility for gender equality is part and parcel of normalization and, thus, persistence of female disadvantage in managerial ranks. Our findings suggest the strong presence of three components identified in Acker's (2006) framework as building blocks of gender inequality in management: legitimacy of inequality, invisibility of inequality,

and control and compliance. Although Acker (2006) developed the notion of inequality regimes based on her research mainly in the United States, the framework is abstract and flexible enough to accommodate cross-cultural variations in gender inequality experiences, systems, and dynamics and has been applied in different cultural contexts (e.g., Cooke & Xiao, 2014; Healy, Bradley, & Forson, 2011; Murray & Syed, 2010; Seierstad & Healy, 2012). Yet our findings highlight that cultural context plays an important role in how different dimensions of inequality regimes manifest. In the Chinese context, the culture and tradition color the way in which gender inequalities are rendered invisible, legitimized, and internalized. In other words, culture and tradition constitute the overarching context across which dimensions of inequity regimes (i.e., legitimacy, invisibility, and control and compliance) intersect with changing socioeconomic logics in China (i.e., marketization and individualization).

As Ridgeway and Correll (2004) argue, gendered social relations, whether at work or beyond, are shaped by cultural beliefs, which then influence the distribution of roles and resources in the society and organizations, and inform individuals' interpretations of their circumstances. Gendered cultural beliefs play a significant role in what individuals think a male or female is (in terms of characteristics and capabilities) as well as how a person of a specific gender should behave or act. Dominant gender beliefs, which are deeply social

and yet seemingly natural, then function as a potent and ubiquitously shared anchor for organizational life. In the specific context of China, our findings highlight that widespread gender beliefs, as informed by Confucian gender hierarchies, give meaning and legitimacy to the unequal distribution of managerial roles along gender lines. Furthermore, female managers often internalized the prevailing gendered beliefs and traditions. Thus, Acker's (2006) framework of invisibility, legitimacy, and control and compliance operates in the Chinese ground reality forcefully, as it is buttressed by a long standing Confucian tradition of unequal and rigid gender roles and norms. This gendered tradition accompanied by the recently dominant logics of marketization and individualization allows organizations to eschew responsibility for gender equality. Table VI summarizes how the three dimensions of inequality regimes intersect with the marketization and individualization of responsibility for gender equality in the overarching context of gendered culture and tradition in China. We elaborate on these dimensions in the following sub-sections.

*Legitimacy of Gender Inequality*

Legitimacy of gender inequality in management is central to female managers' accounts and experiences of work. Our findings suggest that gender inequality in management is seen as widely legitimate. Acker (2006) notes that legitimacy of organizational inequalities is influenced by economic

**TABLE VI Three Dimensions of Marketization and Individualization of Responsibility for Gender Equality in the Chinese Work Context**

	<b>Marketization</b>	<b>Individualization</b>	
Invisibility	The interplay between the historically constructed male advantage and market forces remains invisible.	Merit discourse is used to explain career outcomes rendering the male bias invisible and gender inequality an outcome of women's personal choices.	C U L T U R E & T R A D I T I O N
Legitimacy	Gender inequality is seen as irrelevant to commercial-organizational activity.	Gender inequality is normalized as a feature of differences between the sexes either by reference to biology or tradition.	
Control and compliance	The market logic is adopted as the single most important determinant of HR priorities.	A choice discourse is internalized by female managers, and, consequently, limited expectations are placed on the organization in terms of work-life balance and career support.  Female managers develop personal coping strategies to alleviate the effects of gender inequality.	
<b>CULTURE &amp; TRADITION</b>			

and political conditions in the wider society. She gives the example of civil rights and women's liberation movements in the United States as significant catalysts for the decreasing legitimacy of entrenched racial and gender inequalities at work. Similarly, our study points to the impact of changing political economic conditions in China

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*Our study extends the concept of visibility in Acker's (2006) theory of organizational inequality regimes by articulating a visibility-invisibility paradox in terms of the experiences of gender inequality in the working lives of women managers in Chinese organizations. Although numerical underrepresentation of women in managerial ranks is well recognized and thus a visible fact of organizational life, gender disadvantage as the root cause of numerical imbalance remains invisible.*

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in shaping the arguments around the legitimacy of gender inequality in organizations. The traditional gender discourse based on strict Confucian gender hierarchies and the more recent free market-oriented discourse based on individualism and voluntarism (Healy, Bradley, & Mukherjee, 2004; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2011) overlap and work together in legitimizing gender inequality in the organizational environment. As Acker (2006) emphasizes gender hierarchies are often seen as normal and natural, and thus they are legitimized. Our study identifies that normalization of gender inequality may happen through references to biological differences between the sexes, or through references to culture and tradition. Biological differences are often seen as a central feature of work and are referred to as a legitimate basis for existing gender discrepancies in management, in turn naturalizing inequality. In the same vein, culture and tradition are also used as explanations for underrepresentation of women in managerial positions. Confucian tradition informs a gender hierarchy of roles inside and outside of work. As such, differential positions of men and women in organizations are often not recognized as problematic, thereby, normalizing the numerical underrepresentation of women in management and gendered barriers to progression in the organization.

#### *Invisibility of Gender Inequality*

Invisibility of gender inequality, defined as the level of awareness of gender-related imbalances in the organization, is identified in this study as a key constituent of women's managerial experiences. Acker (2006) argues that the invisibility of inequality is not always intentional but it is contingent upon the position of the organizational member vis-à-vis the member's location within the hierarchy. In

this view privilege and disadvantage become invisible to those who are privileged, while people who belong to underprivileged groups may be more cognizant of inequalities (Adler, Brody, & Osland, 2000; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Our study highlights that inequalities may become invisible even to those who are disadvantaged by gender hierarchies. This is particularly evident when the legitimacy of gender inequalities is entrenched and sustained through references to biology, culture, and tradition. Our study extends the concept of visibility in Acker's (2006) theory of organizational inequality regimes by articulating a *visibility-invisibility paradox* in terms of the experiences of gender inequality in the working lives of women managers in Chinese organizations. Although numerical underrepresentation of women in managerial ranks is well recognized and thus a visible fact of organizational life, gender disadvantage as the root cause of numerical imbalance remains invisible. The invisibility of gender disadvantage, discrimination, and sexism hinges on the widespread acceptance of traditional gender binaries as a legitimate framework for the distribution of rewards and job roles, arrangement of working time, and production of organizational culture.

#### *Control and Compliance Mechanisms*

Control mechanisms that prevent resistance against inequalities and compliance of women with the gendered status quo in their organizations form a key component of organizational inequality regimes (Acker, 2006). Our findings underline that female disadvantage in accessing management echelons is maintained through an implicit acceptance of gendered norms by organizational members. Subscribing to taken-for-granted views of differential roles and capabilities of men and women, female managers often limit their own capacity to dispute the gendered organizational codes, beliefs, and activities that undervalue their work and contributions. In this way, women managers consent to a gendered view of work and management where organizational culture and work practices are informed by the male norm. As Acker (2006) explains the ideal worker, around which organizational life is arranged, is a male unencumbered by domestic responsibilities. Similarly, experiences and accounts of female managers in Chinese organizations show that organizational life and patterns of working time are constructed around the presumed male lifestyle, rendering female workers' experiences and expectations irrelevant. Strikingly, female managers' consent to the logic of these control mechanisms and comply with the male-centered arrangement and vision of

management. This study demonstrates that such compliance and consent may be due to external and internal control processes. As Acker (2006) pointed out, internalized control processes may work through female workers' belief in the legitimacy of the privilege of male workers in accessing organizational resources and rewards. The results of our study reveal that women managers operating in highly gendered organizational spaces may come to internalize the logic and dictates of gender hierarchy within the work organization. In such cases, female managers may see that achieving gender inequality is not a legitimate organizational goal. Alternatively, women managers assume that gender hierarchies that permeate the work organization are all-powerful due to the long-standing nature of gendered tradition and thus any challenge to the existing order is unrealistic. An example of external control is frequent referencing of wider constraints, such as market conditions and customer demands, to explain the boundaries of advancing gender equality. Underlying the compliance by female managers is their reduced ability to dissent with the unequal distribution of organizational power due to their current underrepresentation.

### *Responsibility for Ensuring Gender Equality*

This study showcases that wider societal trends and changes are influential in framing how the need for gender equality in organizations is assessed and addressed. What emerged very strongly from the analysis of the qualitative data was that responsibility for achieving equality has been individualized and become contingent upon market forces. Acker (2006) emphasizes that equality legislation and the effective enforcement of legislation by the state are key to decreasing the legitimacy and increasing the visibility of inequalities. In China, the entrenchment of the free market logic coupled with the decreasing efficacy of state's enforcement of gender equality legislation (Cooke, 2005; Cooke & Xiao, 2014) has led to vacation of the gender equality agenda by the state. In this context, organizations are left unchecked while they incorporate traditional gender discourses into their practices. Organizational practices that led to gender imbalances were legitimized and rendered invisible through reference to either long-standing and essentialist views of gender differences based on biological or cultural arguments, or through allusions to competitive market mechanisms and conditions. Existing research points to the use of gendered assumptions around biology, psychology, and role identity as a pretext for perpetuating gender disparity at work (Jackson, Esses, & Burriss, 2001). In China, a similar process of legitimization

of gender imbalances in distribution of managerial positions occurred through references to biological differences or traditional Confucian values.

Furthermore, the impact of the economic liberalization was noteworthy in terms of how it was utilized as a legitimation device. Cooke and Xiao (2014, 39) argue that the shift from a socialist economy to a market economy resulted "in a new dilemma between tradition and modernity, or between Confucianism and the market." Our research confirms that the transition in the economic system has a significant impact on gender-based managerial opportunities and constraints. Yang (1996) suggests that there has been a degree of psychological modernization simultaneous to the societal modernization in the post-command economy era. The gradual liberalization of the Chinese economy, and relatedly the increasing exposure of workers in a range of industries to global trends toward gender equality, may potentially generate positive shifts in the social evolution of gender relations. In this context, women who increasingly enjoy a greater degree of autonomy and personal income growth may find opportunities to challenge the male breadwinner ideology, which could help them to eschew traditional gendered expectations of married life with children or they may successfully be able to transfer responsibility for household activities onto their partners for greater equality of home and work task division.

However, the existence of such effects remains so far too nascent or tentative on the whole, and attempts at gender equality remain provisional and contingent, despite forces of rapid modernization permeating the Chinese economic context (Xu, 2005; Zuo & Tang, 2000). For example, women who are outside of the traditional family structure remain stigmatized. There is even a commonly used derogatory term, *sheng nu* ("leftover" women), in reference to educated, high-earning women who are in their late twenties or older and who decide to remain single in presumed pursuit of professional career advancement (Fincher, 2014). Unsurprisingly, no such corresponding term exists for men of similar

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situation and circumstances. This is but one example of the social pressure women may face if they prioritize their career aspirations. In fact, our findings suggest that the free market logic works in conjunction with Confucian values, rather than serving as a source of an alternative mode of role divisions, which alter the traditional gender norms. As Ridgeway and Correll (2004) point out, gender beliefs permeate all social life, which is to say that not only do they serve as the master relational mode through which individuals interact with each other in the organization, but also they shape the policies and processes of organizations, whose gendered nature remains invisible and unrecognized. Market logic is then used to legitimize existing gender imbalances by incorporating the presumed traditional value orientations held by extra organizational market actors such as customers and suppliers. The lack of consideration for gender equality was legitimized by using the dominant market rationale that organizational practices should be informed only by profit motive. External forces such as customer expectations and the dictates of market dynamics are offered as explanation for gender imbalances in management. Furthermore, female managers consented to organizational gender inequalities and adopted a language of individual choice to explain gender-based disparities in career outcomes. In that context, the responsibility for equality and fairness is removed from the remit of the state and organizations and transferred to individual women.

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*The free market logic works in conjunction with Confucian values, rather than serving as a source of an alternative mode of role divisions, which alter the traditional gender norms.*

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### *Implications for HR Practice*

Bilimoria, et al. (2008) refer to pipeline and climate initiatives in promoting gender equality in organizations. Pipeline initiatives aim to address the supply side issues, whereas climate initiatives focus on improving the inclusiveness of the organization. In the context of China, pipeline initiatives to improve gender representation in management involve a number of HR interventions. At the point of entry, targeted recruitment may help increase the number of female applicants for managerial roles. Leadership development programs may help organizations to identify high potential female employees and coach them from an early point in their careers toward senior management roles. Research demonstrates the value of networking (Forret & Dougherty, 2004) and mentoring (Ragins & Kram, 2007) as other

forms of pipeline initiatives in improving career prospects of underrepresented groups. Formal and informal identity-based networking can be promoted by HR managers to facilitate mentoring through which junior-level women are supported to utilize their full potential (Adya, 2008; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). Such networking can also open up avenues for sharing coping strategies in countering gender stereotypes that disadvantage management-track female employees. Identity-based groups in organizations may serve as forums for discussions and an exchange of ideas to help uncover instances of gender-based disadvantages and different forms of unconscious bias based on gender stereotyping. Learning from such groups and networks may, in turn, be shared with the HR managers to inform organization-specific diversity initiatives. Cross-sex mentoring and networking can work alongside identity-based networking to ensure that gender equality issues are not kept as silos concerning female employees only. Research shows the value of cross-sex mentoring, given the gender-based differential access to mentoring opportunities (Ragins & Cotton, 1991). Initiatives enabling female employees to secure mentoring opportunities from senior managers of both sexes can help increase women's representation in management. HR managers need to ensure that the value of gender equality is recognized and the responsibility for gender parity is shared by organizational members, both male and female, across different levels and functions.

The second type of initiatives that organizations may use to enhance gender equality in management is climate initiatives (Bilimoria et al., 2008). Such initiatives aim to change the organizational culture to become more inclusive. Climate initiatives require raising the awareness of organizational members about gender inequalities and achieving commitment for greater gender equality. Our study identified that gender stereotypes based on traditional values have an important impact on the careers of female managers in Chinese organizations. Therefore, it is imperative for HR managers to design training initiatives for employees at all levels as well as for managers. These training programs need to combat unconscious biases and stereotypes based on gender, and to aim changing both beliefs and behaviors. Acker (2006, p. 454) suggests that change toward greater equality is more likely when the legitimacy of inequalities is low and visibility is high. Recent scholarship suggests that diversity training that incorporates a justice perspective is received better by participants (Jones, King, Nelson, Geller, & Bowes-Sperry, 2013). Accordingly, the gender diversity training has to be devised with the twin

goals of revealing the implicit gender bias in organizational practices, processes, and culture while at the same time invalidating arguments supporting gender discrimination. Organizational audits that diagnose the nature and extent of barriers to career progression encountered by female employees are critical to evidencing gender imbalances, thus increasing the visibility and decreasing the legitimacy of gender inequality. However, climate activities such as training should not be stand-alone activities for raising awareness on organizational gender goals but instead gender diversity objectives have to be frequently communicated to all members of the organization. Another critical HR action in ensuring gender inclusiveness in the Chinese work context is the better provision of work-life balance initiatives (Cooke & Xiao, 2014). Our research identified that the lack of organizational support for balancing the demands of work and family is a key barrier impeding the career progression of female managers in China, who are left alone to find individual solutions. Organizational work-life balance provisions may include flexible work arrangements, child care support, and job sharing, among others.

The diversity of top management as well as the support for diversity from top management are key to ensuring an inclusive climate in the organization (Cox, 1991; Scott, Heathcote, & Gruman, 2011). As Day and Greene (2008) suggest, the more diverse the senior management echelon, the greater the success of diversity programs. However, even in traditionally feminized lines of work such as HRM, women's progress to strategic leadership posts is limited (Pichler, Simpson, & Stroh, 2008). As female HR practitioners themselves often operate from a disempowered position in organizations, their efforts to influence organizational members as well as initiate and secure buy-in for diversity programs designed to address gender inequality may be subject to constraints. Therefore, it is necessary for HR managers to secure top management commitment.

Our study shows that a key justification for organizations to not engage in gender equality projects is the prevailing belief that equality issues are not seen as the legitimate remit of private sector organizations in China. The resultant marketization leads to a focus on the tangible aspects of the commercial activity, thereby overlooking the link between commercial performance and effective management of human resources. Gender diversity is associated with increased organizational performance such as higher sales revenue and firm value, larger market share, wider customer base (Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008; Herring, 2009; Welbourne, Cycyota, & Ferrante, 2007). Thus, it is

important for HR managers in China to formulate and communicate the business case for gender equality. The business case may refer to full utilization of the internal and external pool of talent, and responding to the gender composition of the customer base, among others. Each organization needs to craft its own business case arguments to show that gender equality offers significant commercial benefits.

One of the findings of our study relates to the lack of organizational support mechanisms to promote progression of women into managerial ranks. There is a general sense that ensuring gender equality is not the job of organizations. Conversely, the discussion on organizations' role in promoting gender equality and diversity is now well developed

in the Western context (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Accordingly, sophisticated diversity programs designed to enhance inclusion of women are in the HR repertoire of many multinational organizations (Virick & Greer, 2012). Thus, there may be a scope for interorganizational and intercultural sharing of good practices in this field. However, our findings showed that gender inequality issues in Chinese organizations are closely linked to the wider culture and traditions and, hence, may have unique aspects that may be left unattended through direct transposition of policies developed in other contexts. Mechanistic and one-size-fits-all diversity approaches may be ineffective in creating inclusive organizational environments because they overlook relational and cultural aspects of group-based differences at work (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008). HR managers need to account for the national and cultural context in designing gender and diversity initiatives (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2009). In managing gender-based differences, HR practitioners need to adopt contextually specific strategies that counter the barriers experienced by the female employees in their organizations. For instance, gender diversity interventions in Chinese organizations need to account for Confucian beliefs and values that may be held by both male and female organizational members. These traditional beliefs feed into unconscious biases, which may then lead to noninclusive behaviors at work. Therefore, diversity programs need to be tailored to uncover and overcome culture specific values, assumptions, and expectations that normalize gender hierarchies.

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*Organizational audits that diagnose the nature and extent of barriers to career progression encountered by female employees are critical to evidencing gender imbalances, thus increasing the visibility and decreasing the legitimacy of gender inequality.*

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**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This article exemplifies a small-scale, explorative yet in-depth investigation into an understudied but important topic, the managerial experiences of female employees in Chinese organizations. Future research is required to hone and develop the findings in this study on a larger scale to further elucidate the complex underpinnings of women’s underrepresentation in management roles in China as well as the variety of disadvantages experienced by female employees in Chinese organizations.

*Constitutive elements of female disadvantage in organizations can often revolve around the intersections of gender with sexuality, motherhood, ethnicity, and age, among others. Thus, future research that takes into account such intersectionalities may expose hidden within-group variance in barriers faced by female managers in Chinese organizations.*

For instance, experiences of female managers may qualitatively differ in state-sector organizations as compared with the private-sector organizations that employ the participants of this study. Similarly, there may be variations across the rural or urban divides as well as income strata and educational levels that may best be explicated and extrapolated into patterns with predictive power in future large-N studies. Another area of further inquiry is the investigation of intersectionality, that is, multiple identity positions that may be simultaneously occupied by female managers in Chinese organizations. Constitutive elements of female disadvantage in organizations can often revolve around the intersections of gender with sexuality, motherhood, ethnicity, and age, among others (Ozbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011). Thus, future research that takes into account such intersectionalities may expose hidden within-group variance in barriers faced by female managers in Chinese organizations.

Future research delving into the organizational challenges faced by female managers in China can extend the scope of the analysis by interviewing both male and female

employees to elucidate how gender biases and stereotypes are negotiated within the interactions of organizational members. This may bring new insights into how male managers exert privilege, power, and influence within the managerial ranks vis-à-vis female managers. In gender-unequal organizational orders, men often function as gatekeepers of change toward greater gender equality, because men are the traditional beneficiaries of

gender hierarchies, and the organizational rules and organizational practices have evolved to ensconce men in positions of long standing advantage vis-à-vis women (Connell, 2005). Acknowledging the role of men as gatekeepers implies that effective HR policies to promote gender equality should be based on not only understanding the conditions that give rise to and perpetuate men’s managerial advantage in organizations, as is highlighted by the present study, but also drawing connections between HR strategy and male managers in positions of change agency to provide frameworks for concerted efforts to foster gender-equal organizational systems, processes, and practices. Future research that charts how male gatekeepers can be incorporated into organizational strategies to facilitate gender equality may thus provide an additional dimension to the road map toward transforming Chinese organizations into more gender-equal entities. Future studies can usefully widen the present study’s analytical reach by conducting research specifically with actors who are influential in decision making in the government and organizations. State officials in charge of regulatory and enforcement activities can be interviewed to understand governmental policies, priorities, and pipeline initiatives for promoting gender equality in a liberal economic order. Additionally, research can be conducted with significant organizational actors such as HR managers, equality officers, and middle and senior managers to carry out an organizational analysis of gendered barriers and outcomes in managerial career advancement.

This study delineates the strong grip of gendered biases and stereotypes that afflict female employees’ career progression in Chinese organizations, which the era of market liberalization has brought into sharper effect. As the article contends, the experiences of female managers are affected by a range of circumstances that work in tandem with the vaunted new free market system; the solutions that are likely to be more resonant in commercial organizations will be those designed and developed in tandem with key organizational actors. Therefore, future research projects based on action research schemes that might involve HR officers, female managers, and members of top management cadres can help generate practice-proof, joined-up HR solutions. Additionally, action-based future research can pave the way in capturing much-needed, yet often-elusive, organizational buy-in and support for major shifts in expectations and behaviors and dislodge otherwise highly calcified normative orders that prevail within organizations (Stringer, 1996). In the absence of well-enforced national gender equality policies, and given the current growth-prioritizing economic posture in China, future works

that employ action research can illuminate novel pathways that can achieve stronger organizational commitment to gender equality.

Existing literature identifies that female talent is underutilized despite widespread skills shortages in the Chinese labor market (Cooke & Xiao, 2014; Tatli et al., 2013). Thus, research evidence is needed to demonstrate that gender equality can be a significant catalyst for resolving talent shortages. Similarly, future research can investigate the business case for gender diversity in the context of Chinese commercial organizations. For example, larger-scale statistical studies could investigate the potential benefits of gender diversity in management ranks in Chinese organizations in terms of improved creativity and innovation due to inclusiveness as Chinese organizations internationalize and compete in global markets.

### Conclusion

Based on interviews with female managers, this article identified that the responsibility for

promoting gender equality in management is marketized and individualized. The retrenchment of the state's regulatory influence in the aftermath of economic liberalization and the rising centrality of profit maximization as the sole organizational concern enhance the legitimacy of the gender imbalance in management. The existing gender inequality and the lack of responsibility for tackling it have been either legitimized by alluding to the commercial-only focus of organizations or rendered invisible through a belief in individual choice as the determining factor of career progression for women. Gender inequality in management is also maintained through the compliance of female managers with the presumed legitimacy of gender-based differential access to managerial roles. References to the market forces, competitive pressures, and individual choices by female managers are often made in explaining the unequal career paths and outcomes for men and women in their organizations.

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