CHINESE WOMEN'S CAREER INTERRUPTIONS:

A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

Career interruptions cause severe penalties such as wage decrease, position loss, and self-doubt. The situation is even worse for women, who are still widely perceived as primary caregivers and housekeepers in many cultures. While the existing literature focuses on the adverse outcomes of career interruptions, little is actually known about individuals' perceptions of career interruptions, their career interruption experiences, and the strategies that could help individuals successfully reenter the workplace.

Following Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach, the present study investigates Chinese women's career interruption experiences and, more importantly, explores the personal skills, organizational support, and national policies that can ease the reentering process. Three research questions guided my study: What are Chinese women's experiences with career interruption in urban China? How do Chinese women perceive their career interruptions? And, what strategies can help Chinese women return to work?

To answer these research questions, I collected qualitative data primarily through intensive interviews (in-depth one-to-one interviews). I interviewed 21 urban Chinese women who had a least one interruption in their career. The rich interview accounts revealed the participants' perceptions of their career interruptions, their experiences with career interruption and reentering, the career decision-making process, the influence of social and cultural contexts, and individuals' reflections and strategies. Findings suggest that these well-educated women encountered a multitude of challenges such as a bias towards interrupted careers in the hiring process, a lack of organizational support, and limited vocational training resources. Drawing on the participants' experience and advice, supplemented by relevant studies in the career

development literature, I proposed an integrative model of interventions to address the challenges reported by the participants and support future returners. The model includes four intervention aspects: counseling services, organizational efforts, social support, and individual responses. Detailed strategies are provided.

This grounded theory study has three major contributions. First, unlike previous studies that drew heavily on the researchers' research experience and conceptulization in defining career interruptions, this study expands scholarly understanding of career interruptions by presenting the participants' own definitions, perceptions, and what they believed were society's perceptions of career interruptions. Second, this study contributes to the field of human resource development (HRD) by filling several gaps in the career interruption literature. For example, little effort was made to investigate the career interruption experiences. My dissertation delineates the career interruptions in terms of the career decisions leading to a career interruption, the activities during career interruptions, opportunities and challenges, preparation before reentry, and the social and cultural contexts. Third, this exploration of career interruptions provides practical insights for HRD professionals, career counselors, social workers, and individuals who need to help employees and particularly women navigate career breaks.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I introduce the dissertation topic and the overall study design, followed by the significance and delimitations of the study. First, I present the background and the central phenomenon of my study. Next, I provide an overview of the dissertation design, including the research purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, and methods. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the significance and the boundaries I set for this study.

Background of the Study

While searching for women's career development literature, I encountered a report titled *The Continuum Center for Women: Education Volunteerism Employment* (Seay & Creek, 1973). The report was produced by *the Continuum Center for Women* at Oakland University in August 1973. In the 1960s, a group of adult educators, social workers, clinical psychologists, and counselors at the Division of Continuing Education at Oakland University decided to support women who wanted to make a role change from homemakers to career women. Therefore, they launched *the Continuum Center for Women* to provide professional services. The report is a summary of their work and findings. While reading the report, a descriptive paragraph caught my attention:

> Her college diploma lay in a bottom drawer. Her typewriter was rusty; her teacher's certificate inactive. Her older children were engrossed with school, and her husband was working earnestly for his next promotion …… Her high school and college interests were rusty and long untested. She knew the world had been going through much change. Her husband, for example, had many new skills. He understood many things that she had not

had the opportunities or incentives for learning. She feared that she could no longer march in step with the world outside her home. Her confidence evaporated. What should she do now? What could she do now? (Seay & Creek, 1973, p. 7)

It is heart-breaking to see that although almost fifty years have gone by since the report was first published, the real world never changes. Take myself as an example; I interrupted my career from 2013 to 2016. During that interruption period, I asked myself the same questions over and over again. What should I do now? What could I do now? My graduate school diploma "lay in a bottom drawer," my writing ability was "long untested," and my TOEFL test results "inactive." I shared the same fear, distress, and anxiety with women fifty years ago.

Career interruptions, described as an off-ramp on the career highway (Hewlett & Luce, 2005), refer to a break from employment for a certain period. Some terms and phrases have been used interchangeably with career interruptions, including career breaks (Arun et al., 2004), employment interruptions (Theunissen, Verbruggen, Forrier, & Sels, 2011), occupational career interruptions (Lovell, 2007), career gaps, broken career (Ang, 2007), extended break (Stanley, 2018), career sidestep (Theunissen et al., 2011), and unemployment spells (Theunissen et al., 2011). This study uses career interruptions and career breaks interchangeably. In 2003, Lisa Belkin coined the term *opting out* in her article published in the *New York Times Magazine* to raise awareness of women's disjointed career paths (Belkin, 2003). Since then, many scholars have explicitly used the phrases *opting in* and *opting out* to refer to women's exit and reentry on their career trajectories (Boushey, 2008; Cabrera, 2007; Elley-Brown et al., 2018; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012).

Existing empirical studies of career interruptions have focused primarily on female professionals; this is because they are more likely to have an interrupted career compared to their

male counterparts (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Beck, 1997; Elley-Brown, Pringle, & Harris, 2018; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2006; Royalty, 1998). Women are more likely to interrupt their careers because, in most cultures, they still fall into the stereotypes of primary caregivers (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Malo & Muñoz-Bull, 2008). Moreover, childbirth and childcare increase their chance of taking career breaks (Albrecht et al., 1999; Gupta & Smith, 2003). For these reasons, women have become a target population in career interruptions literature.

Scholars have found that individuals' career trajectories tend to be flexible and frayed rather than linear and non-interrupted (Arthur, 1994; Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth, & Larsson, 1996; Driver, 1985; Hall, 1996; Savickas, 2004). However, ample research shows severe consequences of taking career breaks, such as wage penalties, position loss (Arun, Arun, & Borooah, 2004; Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Reitman & Schneer, 2005), workplace discrimination (Mavriplis et al., 2010), and decreased self-confidence (Arora & Sharma, 2018).

Problem of the Study

An underestimate of women's career advancement could significantly undermine social cohesion, decrease economic efficiency, and deprive individual rights (Wang & Klugman, 2020; Wu & Zhou, 2015; Yao, Duan, & Baruch, 2020). Despite the progress that researchers have made, we have much yet to learn about women's career interruptions.

First, theoretical expansion and refinement are needed to better understand career interruptions. Currently, the conceptualization of career interruptions remains outdated, and the definition is also blurry. The conceptualization of career interruptions is outdated and filled with negative stereotypes. Online discussion forums, reports, and articles have started to question the negative stereotype of career interruptions. For example, in March 2020, Linkedin.com

published an article titled *Near half of mothers work, take a break, and work again. Why is there still such a stigma?* (Fairchild, 2020) In a similar vein, hrmonline.com.au published the article *Career breaks are the new norm—so why are they still stigmatized?* (Neilson, 2019) Those publications communicated the same message: career interruptions are normal; however, they are stigmatized by our society. Nevertheless, this message has been largely ignored or played down in practically all of the thought and work in contemporary social science and psychological science. The academic field remains unresponsive to the concerns raised by the practitioners, journalists, and social workers. A good example is the terms used to refer to an employment gap, such as career breaks (Arun et al., 2004), employment interruptions (Theunissen et al., 2011), and broken career (Ang, 2007), all of which carry negative connotations. These terms are modeled after an outdated, male-centric model of career development, viewing the linear and non-stop career paths as normal and well-received. In addition, the definition of career interruptions is still blurry. As revealed in Chapter II, definitions of career interruptions exist in a scattered manner. For my dissertation study, I adopt the definition of career interruptions proposed by Schneer and Reitman (1997): "a gap is defined as a period of time without employment. It is distinguished from a leave from a job to which one expects to return" (pp. 411-412).

Second, extant research on career interruptions is dominated by quantitative approaches (Bian & Wang, 2019). However, it is widely recognized that qualitative methodologies are more appropriate for understanding individuals' life experiences and their strategies in response to career interruptions. In addition, among various qualitative approaches, grounded theory has been under-utilized in the HRD field that is in critical need of solid theory and theory-building research. Given this consideration, a grounded theory study is not only necessary for theory-

building in HRD, but it will also help derive practical guidance for navigating career interruptions from the theories generated.

Third, compared with the abundant studies that revealed the consequences of having an interrupted career, literature on career interruption experiences and coping strategies is more limited in volume. In addition, strategies grounded in current scholarship (Cardoso, Savickas, & Gonçalves, 2019; Ebberwein, Krieshok, Ulven, & Prosser, 2011; Heppner, Multon, & Johnston, 1994; Motulsky, 2010; Phillips-Miller et al., 2000) were initially designed to address career transitions or career shifts, not career interruptions. Further, most of the strategies were derived from theoretical conceptualization and policy examination. This study addresses this gap by seeking solutions based on the firsthand experiences of individuals who have managed to return to the workplace after experiencing a career interruption.

Lastly, there is an increasing need for a better understanding of interrupted careers. The necessity of understanding a "broken" career has been further compounded by COVID-19 that occurred in 2020. As a result of this pandemic, numerous people worldwide lost their jobs overnight and are struggling to survive in the competitive labor market. As a field that is charged with individual career development, HRD is well positioned to assist in formulating meaningful policies for career centers and the labor department; a close look at career interruptions is among many efforts HRD researchers could actively pursue.

Research Context

This study is situated in the context of mainland China (hereinafter abbreviated as China) where women are faced with challenges such as a widened gender wage gap, lingering workplace discrimination, the glass ceiling, remaining stereotypes, and a lack of support (Attané,

2012; Zhang & Huang, 2020). Despite China's rapid economic growth and drastic societal, and cultural transformations, the number of Chinese women in the workplace has been declining since the 1980s (Burnett, 2010; Cooke & Xiao, 2014). Although many Chinese women have chosen to exit their career tracks at certain points in life, little is known about the stories behind their career decisions, their experiences, and the strategies they utilized.

In the 1980s, China launched a series of economic reforms to revitalize the Chinese economy (Burnett, 2020; Cooke & Xiao, 2014). During the reform period, women were disproportionately placed in certain occupations such as health, education, hotel, wholesale and retail sectors. At the same time, their male counterparts were encouraged to pursue more prestigious and highest-paying jobs in foreign trade and joint ventures (Wei, 2011). Those implemented reform measures continue to influence today's gender segregation in the Chinese labor market (Burnett, 2020).

The Chinese society, including Chinese women themselves, are still strongly influenced by the traditional mindset that women should take more gendered household roles (Attané, 2012; Maurer-Fazio, Hughes, & Zhang, 2007; Qing, 2020). It is found that women in China work a sixth of their life unpaid (Bloomberg, 2019). And, for those with children, "each additional child lowers hourly wages by about 12 percent" (Yu & Xie, 2018, p. 1067). Furthermore, with the decrease in the number of state-supported childcare facilities as a result of China's state-owned enterprise reform, Chinese career women, particularly those with young children, were put in an even more challenging situation to juggle between work and childcare responsibilities (Zhang & Huang, 2020).

Within the Chinese context, this study focuses on career women in urban China because extant research shows disparate structural differences between rural and urban female

populations in China (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014; Liu & Chan, 1999; Lui, 2016; Nagi, 2004). Specifically, this decision was made for three reasons. First, China is undergoing rapid urbanization. Individuals living in urban areas will soon outnumber those in rural areas. According to the World Bank, in 1978, "less than 20 percent of China's population lived in cities; now the share is more than half. On the basis of the country's per capita income, China's urbanization is projected to reach about 70 percent—some 1 billion people—by 2030" (2014, p. 3). Second, since 2003, women's labor force participation in urban China has steadily increased (Wu & Zhou, 2015). However, there is still minimal understanding of the career decisions, career trajectories, and career strategies for women in urban China. Thus, it is imperative to add this new knowledge to the literature. Third, urban China presents a dynamic context for research. Female migration workers have increasingly left their rural homes behind and have migrated to cities for better pay and more job opportunities (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014; Song & Dong, 2018). This highly complex demographic landscape allows for the collection of information-rich data (Patton, 2002).

China is conducting the Seventh National Population Census starting in November 2020. Hence, this study will refer to the most recent completed national census—the Sixth National Population Census—while defining urban China. The Sixth National Population Census (2010) defined urban areas as follows:

> The definition of urban and rural areas mainly depends on the de facto built-up physical condition. In the districts and the cities that include public facilities, accommodation facilities, and city government were defined as urbanized areas, and all the residents in the areas were deemed as urban population (Qin & Zhang, 2014, p. 499).

Research Purpose and Questions

In light of the gaps identified in the current knowledge base, the present study aims to explore women's career interruption experiences in urban China, their perceptions about career interruptions, and the strategies they utilized to navigate their career interruptions. Three research questions guided my study:

1. What are Chinese women's experience with career interruption in urban China?

2. How do Chinese women perceive their career interruptions?

3. What strategies can help Chinese women return to work?

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have introduced different perspectives to understand career transitions such as career interruptions. For example, career theories such as happenstance theory (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999) and career construction theory (Savickas, 2004, 2013) suggest that career counselors and individuals approach unanticipated events more positively and proactively. Taoism, a prominent traditional Chinese philosophy, has received scant scholarly attention in the career development field despite its wide application in western therapy (Moss & Perryman, 2012), HRD (Lee & Hansen, 2009), and the management field (Lee, Han, Byron, & Fan, 2008). In this study, I borrow several Taoism ideas (e.g., *wu-wei*, *wu*, *yin* and *yang*) to help conceptualize career interruptions.

The unique contribution of 8ntroduceng Taoism into the conceptualization of career interruptions is to help bring the ontological aspects of career interruptions into a sharper focus. The existing literature has an epistemological bias in that it explains how and why individuals navigate and experience career interruptions. However, the ontological aspects of career

interruptions are largely neglected or subordinated. The ontological aspects of an issue warrant particular attention due, in part, to the fact that these real attributes "are distinct from their empirical understanding" and "exist irrespective of empirical experiences" (Bansal, Kim, & Wood, p. 221). Lacking a sufficient understanding of the nature of career interruptions would possibly lead to distortion, falsification, or neglect of interrupted careers. In addition, the Taoism principles warn of the potential risks of a persistent push for change, especially when the situation has reached the point of rigidity and no change. Rather than overpower and change the status-quo, Taoism suggests approaching the system we live in through active imagination, intuition, and meaning-making, and eventually developing action through inaction (Coward, 1985). Therefore, it offers a constructive mindset in coping with psychological and attitude issues (e.g., anxiety) related to career break experiences (Moss & Perryman, 2012).

To sum up, the present study borrowed the conceptions, such as *Wu* (non-being), *Wu-wei* (strategic non-action), and the cyclic view of time from Chinese Taoism to reveal the real attributes of career interruptions, introduce a new way of meaning-making, and point toward directions for future research and practice.

Overview of Methodology and Methods

The study adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach developed by Kathy Charmaz (2014). Charmaz (2006) bridged the social constructionism perspective with the grounded theory approach, stating that "we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (p. 10). However, in the last two decades, Charmaz (2000, 2002, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2014) further developed and changed her approach. Due to the substantial differences in her approaches, I specifically chose Charmaz's 2014 approach as the guiding methodology because the 2014

edition provided sufficient details and practical guidelines regarding what grounded theorists should do through the research process.

In order to participate in the study, the women needed to meet three criteria. First, they must be Chinese women of 18 years and older and live in urban China. Second, they must have experienced one or more career interruptions with at least one exceeding one year. Third, they must have reentered the workplace after the career interruption(s) so that they could speak to their experience in returning to the workforce.

For sampling, I utilized a combination of initial sampling and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014) strategies. At the initial sampling stage, I utilized a combination of convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and criterion sampling to recruit my participants. Later, I used theoretical sampling to help "elaborate and refine the categories" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 193).

I collected qualitative data primarily through intensive interviews (in-depth one-to-one interviews). Due to the social distancing requirement under the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted all the interviews online through Zoom, Skype, WeChat, or any other video chatting software preferred by the participants. For data analysis, I followed the sequence of initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding proposed by Charmaz (2014).

Significance of the Study

This study is significance in several aspects. First, unlike previous studies that drew heavily on the researchers' research experience (Field & Paddison, 1989; Padula, 1994) and conceptualization (Schneer & Reitman, 1997) in defining career interruptions, this study expands current knowledge about career interruptions by presenting the participants' own definitions, perceptions, and what they believed were society's perceptions of career interruptions. As a

result, this study provides a fresh perspective on career interruptions based on firsthand experience.

Second, this dissertation study contributes to the field of HRD by filling several gaps in the career interruption literature. First, the existing literature focuses almost exclusively on the consequences of taking career interruptions (Cools & Strøm, 2016; Duvivier & Nancy, 2015; Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Hotchkiss et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2016; Looze, 2014; Napari, 2010; Taniguchi, 1999). Little effort was made to understand the experience of career interruption. My study delineates the career interruptions in terms of the career decisions leading to a career interruption, the activities during career interruptions, opportunities and challenges, preparation before reentry, and the influence of social and cultural contexts. The participants' life experiences and deep reflections enable HRD researchers to better understand the phenomenon of career interruptions and non-traditional career types at large. Second, women's career interruptions have been examined in various cultural and social contexts, such as Norway (Rønsen & Kitterød, 2015), Ireland (Herman, 2011), Belgium (Frey, 2014), the Republic of Korea (Lee & Baek, 2014), and Japan (Nakamura & Ueda, 1999; Zhou, 2015). However, little is known about women taking career breaks in China. In addition to providing a much needed understanding of Chinese women's experiences of career interruptions, this study also identified culture-specific influencers that impact Chinese career women, for example, choosing between a job within or outside of the system and parents' strong preferences towards "iron rice bowls."

Third, this exploration of career interruptions provides practical insights for HRD professionals, career counselors, social workers, adult educators, and individuals who need to help employees and particularly women navigate career breaks. Recently, the vulnerability of following a linear and uninterrupted career path has been cruelly revealed by the outbreak of the

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COVID-19 pandemic. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), as of October

2020, the number of people unemployed in the United States reached 11.1 million. The

unemployment rate also reached a historic high (6%) in China "even after China resumed work

and production" in April 2020 (Ding, 2020). This unexpected global crisis has made research

that focuses on a successful return to work more imminent than ever.

Delimitations of the Study

Research delimitations are the scope and boundaries that researchers deliberately set for

the research design to pursue an in-depth and focused analysis of the researched topic. I

conducted this study within the following boundaries:

1. The study focused on the female population instead of embracing both genders.

2. The study focused exclusively on urban China.

3. The study explored career interruption experiences and the strategies utilized to navigate

   career interruptions. Therefore, women taking career interruptions but had not returned to

   work or chose not to were not included.

4. Data collection was accomplished in the virtual format due to the COVID-19 restriction.

   Due to the delimitations mentioned above, generalizations beyond the scope of this study

should be made with caution. The unprecedented challenges brought by the COVID-19 made it

impossible for me to travel to China for data collection. However, on the positive side, the online

format of interviewing allowed the participation of women who are geographically dispersed

across China, which might not be possible otherwise.

Summary

In Chapter I, I briefly introduced the problem and background of my study, research context, study design, significances, and delimitations. In general, my dissertation study explores women's career interruption experiences in urban China, their perceptions about career interruptions, and strategies utilized to navigate their career interruptions by following Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter discusses the definitions of career interruptions and synthesizes the current knowledge on career interruptions by reviewing relevant empirical studies and career theories. Chapter II is structured as follows: First, the literature about career interruptions is reviewed in a global context, followed by a review of women's careers in the Chinese context. The following section presents a review of career theories related to career interruptions. Further, I propose a theoretical lens—Taoism, through which we can better understand how the interpretation of career interruptions has been socially constructed thus far.

Definition of Career Interruptions

Considerable growth and development have occurred in empirical studies about career interruptions, while there has been little theoretical refinement. The most fundamental problem is that the definition of career interruptions is still blurry (see Table 1). From the 1980s to 1990s, the phrase *reentry women* were frequently used in career counseling literature (Badenhoop & Johansen, 1980; McGraw, 1982; Padula, 1994). For example, in her review of articles published between 1980 to 1990, Padula (1994) defined the term *reentry women* as "women reentering educational institutions or the labor force after an absence ranging from a few years to as many as 35 years or women taking on a new career" (p.10). At that time, many writers showed interest in the struggles, challenges, and needs for women reentering the workplace. Though those studies were still "at an embryonic stage of development" (McGraw, 1982, p.471), they have provided initial evidence on examination of career breaks. However, the term *reentry women* can be misinterpreted because, in many circumstances, this term also points to female offenders who

reenter the community after release. Existing literature predominantly see career interruptions or breaks as taking time off work (S. V. Arun et al., 2004), as Schneer and Reitman (1997) elucidated, "a gap is defined as a period of time without employment. It is distinguished from a leave from a job to which one expects to return" (p. 411-412). Reitman and Schneer (2005), in their longitudinal analysis about managerial careers, defined employment interruption as "an aberration that would result in severe career penalties" (p. 244). Some would simply categorize career interruptions as one type of career transition (Anding, 2011; Cabrera, 2007). For research convenience, Albrecht and his coworkers categorized career interruptions into six types: parental leave, household time, unemployment, military service, other activity (e.g., travel abroad) and diverse activities (summation of several less than three months episodes of nonwork) (Albrecht, Edin, Sundström, & Vroman, 1999). Later, Lovell (2007) further classified occupational-career interruptions into "events such as unemployment, illness and disability, parental leave, household time, providing care for others, schooling, early retirement, military service, and incarceration" (p. 47).

Table 1

Selective definitions and classifications of career interruption and its interchangeable terms

Term	Source	Definition or Classification
Career Break	Field & Paddison (1989)	Generally, the term "career break" is used to refer to a break in career for pre-school child care, after which the employee is encouraged to return to the same employer on previous terms and conditions (p. 22).
Reentry Women	Padula (1994)	women reentering educational institutions or the labor force after an absence ranging from a few years to as many as 35 years or women taking on a new career (p. 10).

Table 1 Continued

Term	Source	Definition or Classification
Gap	Schneer and Reitman (1997)	a gap is defined as a period of time without employment. It is distinguished from a leave from a job to which one expects to return (p. 411-412)
Career Interruption	Albrecht, Edin, Sundström, & Vroman (1999)	parental leave, household time, unemployment, military service, other activity (e.g., travel abroad) and diverse activities (summation of several less than three months episodes of nonwork)
Career Break	Healy (1999)	For the purposes of the study, a 'career break' is defined as any break from teaching lasting twelve weeks or longer. This inclusive definition enables a consideration of the effect of the mothering phase on commitments rather than the career break per se (p. 186).
Re-entrant	Tijdens (2002)	The Women's Wages Survey included detailed questions about women's work history. The respondent was asked if she had had no paid work for a period longer than one year. Altogether, 24% of the women had interrupted their careers for at least one year to take care of children or the home, and then started to work again. These women are defined as a re-entrant (p. 123).
Employment Interruption	Reitman and Schneer (2005)	an aberration that would result in severe career penalties (p. 244)
Career Interruptions	Spivey (2005)	time spent outside the labor force
Occupational Career Interruptions	Lovell (2007)	Occupational-career interruptions include events such as unemployment, illness and disability, parental leave, household time, providing care for others, schooling, early retirement, military service, and incarceration (p. 47).

Table 1 Continued

Term	Source	Definition or Classification
Career Break/Gap	Mavriplis, Heller, Beil, Dam, Yassinskaya, Shaw, & Sorensen (2010)	Women more often than men may find themselves in a "career break" or "gap", which we will define, for the purposes of this study, as a time without the full-time employment necessary to lead them toward progress in their chosen field or career (p. 142).
Work Interruptions/Employment Breaks/Career Interruptions	Meurs, Pailhé, & Ponthieux (2010)	time spent out of the labor market
Employment Interruption	Theunissen et al. (2011)	The employment interruption types included are family leave, unemployment, self-employment, educational leave, and a category of other interruptions (for example, travel, voluntary work) (p. 110).
Career Break	Mortelmans & Frans, 2017	There are several options that people can choose from when taking a career break: full-time or part-time breaks, and specific thematic leave. Among these 'thematic' forms of leave are three important types: parental leave, leave for medical assistance or leave to undertake palliative care (p. 170).

As discussed before, women's career breaks due to maternal leave have been widely researched in different contexts; thus, many would equal career interruptions with maternal leave in their empirical studies. Under this circumstance, the meanings of career interruptions largely depend on the leave provisions of different cultures, countries, industries, and organizations. For example, Sweden allows for flexible use of paternal leave until the child is eight years old. The research of women's career interruptions in Sweden is basically about combined periods of non-work before the child turns eight (Pylkkänen & Smith, 2003). The situation in the United States

is different. Though for some states, the length might be one year, for most areas, 6-month is seen as a threshold for maternal leave because women are allowed to return with the same pay rate within half a year (Spivey, 2005). This was supported by other recent studies claiming that those who interrupted their careers for more than two years were more likely to suffer from the wage penalty upon return (Arora & Sharma, 2018; Napari, 2010).

In the present dissertation, the definition of career interruptions followed the one raised by Schneer and Reitman (1997), which says that "a gap is defined as a period of time without employment. It is distinguished from a leave from a job to which one expects to return" (p. 411-412).

Empirical Studies

In this section, I review empirical studies about career interruptions in the following aspects: reasons for taking a career interruption, career outcomes of interrupted careers, the challenge of reentry, and suggested strategies. In addition, I describe how career interruption has been stigmatized.

Reasons for Taking a Career Interruption

Careers are interrupted for different reasons. Even though people may have intended to stay, some professionals were forced to leave their jobs because of situational factors. For example, starting in the late 1980s, societal changes such as saturation of management positions, downsizing and reorganizing of organizations, and slow economic growth caused unprecedented employment gaps for managers; therefore, a lot of MBAs had to deal with a broken career in the 1990s (Schneer & Reitman, 1997). Workplace incivility, discrimination, and mistreatment undoubtedly pushed people out of their jobs as well (Crowley, 2013). Besides, in an era where

cross-border collaboration and exchange are prevalent, a considerable number of professionals have needed to sacrifice their jobs due to the relocation of their partners (Eich-Krohm, 2007). In addition, long-term illness is another unanticipated situation in which securing a job might be impossible (Lovell, 2006). Meanwhile, others may voluntarily choose to interrupt their careers. In those cases, multiple factors would impact professionals' intention to exit and return. For career women, children, marriage, and other family responsibilities have often been a primary barrier for reentering (Evers & Sieverding, 2014; García-Manglona, 2015). Furthermore, the high cost of child care and inflexible working hours further hinder the process (Durand & Randhawa, 2002). Nevertheless, the most recent studies have shown that the "child effect" (the number of children negatively affecs women's labor force participation) has fallen in certain areas since the 1970s (Boushey, 2008). While in the 1990s, only 39 percent of career women attributed opting out from full-time employment to family reasons (Wenk & Rosenfeld, 1992), more recently, Valentova (2016) found that women born after 1960 are less likely to interrupt their careers for longer than ten years. This means, instead of a complete exit from the workplace, most career women choose to reenter the workforce after a break. Another emerging line of research holds onto the belief that career transitions, such as taking a break from work, are increasingly driven by personal inner desires. Cabrera (2007) reported that 62 percent of career women surveyed interrupted their careers because their career focus or interests had changed. In a similar vein, it was found that in their 30s, many professionals would make voluntary midlife career transitions to garner new, personal, inner perspectives about their working life (Lippert, 1997; Zimpfer and Carr, 1989). Social and economic status also exert an influence on career decisions. Those with higher wages are less likely to make career transitions to avoid a potential period of non-employment (Holzer & La Londe, 2000; Light & Ureta, 1992; Royalty, 1998). It was also

empirically found that people of different races would view career breaks differently. For example, black women tend to remain in the workforce even when their husbands can secure decent-paying jobs, due to their trepidation of the race-based discrimination in the labor market (Taniguchi & Rosenfeld, 2002).

The "mother's re-entry into the workforce" conceptual framework (MoRe Conceptual Framework) developed by Ericksen et al. (2008) listed five driving forces for reentry: financial, environment, self-image, skills, and interests. Nevertheless, those driving forces were sifted through family demands, support, education level, experience, self-concept, and cost/benefit evaluation, and ultimately led to different career outcomes: some found flexible work, home-site work, or part-time work in combination with skill-building as a way out; while others may have had to exit the labor force completely. In certain fields, the reentering process seems to be more challenging due, in part, to its intensive work pace and masculine culture. For example, a case study in the IT industry interviewed 22 female returners and found that none of the participants who interrupted their careers for more than two years managed to return to their previous employers (Panteli, 2006).

Career Outcomes of Interrupted Careers

A broken career is widely associated with obstructive career outcomes. It was empirically found that career interruptions can significantly deteriorate one's career development due, in part, to position loss and wage penalty upon return (S. V. Arun, T. G. Arun, & Borooah, 2004; Evers & Sieverding, 2014). Those issues can be further compounded by career break stigma. In many fields, such as STEM, broken careers are labeled as incompetent and unprofessional (Mavriplis et al., 2010). The stigma is magnified by the dominant linear hierarchy model in those fields (Herman, 2015). Similarly, Stone and Hermandez (2013) found that women have to deal

with flexibility stigma if they choose to balance work and life through flextime. For those who took long-term career breaks, the situation is even worse. Based on a study in IT industries in north India, women professionals reentered the workforce after a break of two years or more struggled with self-doubt, age discrimination, and employer's perception of skill depreciation (Arora & Sharma, 2018). The penalty of taking a career interruption persists, even years after the break. Reitman and Schneer (2005) found that even 25 years after the interruption, professionals working in the managerial field still earn less than those with non-interrupted career paths. To make the situation even worse, a recent study (Jones, Kim, & Park, 2020) assessing the wage penalty for career interruptions among married women revealed that between the 1970s and the 1990s, the wage penalty increased from 40.4 percent to 73.7 percent over the period.

At the macro level, individuals' difficulty in re-entering the workplace may lead to high turnover rates and a staffing crisis. For example, in the 1990s, UK had to launch several national recruitment campaigns to attract former nurses return to the National Health Service (NHS) in reaction to a severe shortage of nursing staff countrywide (Durand & Randhawa, 2002). In the United States, many female teachers with young children chose to stay at home instead of going back. Grissom and Reininger (2012) alerted the policymakers not to ignore such a significant potential source of teacher labor supply.

The Challenges of Reentry

Despite their best efforts, professionals are faced with a considerable number of challenges while reentering the workplace. Mavriplis et al. (2010) listed inhibiting factors such as underdeveloped networks and stereotyping as significant hurdles to reentering. Career break stigma is prevalent, especially in those fields where linear and upward career path is normalized (Bastalich et al., 2007). Very often, career women simply felt their organizations do not welcome

them after a career break (Fairchild, 2020). Skill depreciation might be negligible for career breaks of one year or less, yet for those who took a break of 13 years or more, it is requisite to participate in skill development (Arora & Sharma, 2018). The length of career interruption also matters. It was found that career breaks of less than one year or for educational purposes were less likely to be negatively stereotyped. However, those who interrupted their careers for more than two years found it extremely difficult to reenter (Arora & Sharma, 2018). Along with long career-breaks is perceived age discrimination upon return (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Internally, a lack of confidence and self-doubt also get in the way (Arora & Sharma, 2018). For mothers, a lack of daycare facilities and organizational support hurdles reentry (Arora & Sharma, 2018; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Rønsen & Kitterød, 2015). Existing studies also highlighted some significant factors that can positively affect reentering experiences. Partners' instrumental and emotional support would work favorably for women's reentry and career advancement in the following years (Bröckel, 2016). Support and connected knowing (to exchange knowledge coming from personal experiences) from people with similar experiences is also needed (Ericksen, Jurgens, Garrett, & Swedburg, 2008). Besides, professional identity, professional connectedness, accessibility to resources, and flexibility of employment options were also proven to be constructive (Dodds & Herkt, 2013).

Suggested Strategies

The research on women's career interruptions was heavily leaning towards those caused by family reasons. Consequently, strategies that respond to this type of career interruptions are more well-established. As revealed in the reviewed literature, women can outsource household chores and childcare responsibilities to others such as parents and parents-in-law (Du, Dong, & Zhang, 2019; Shen, Yan, & Zeng, 2016). The even better solution is that husband can equally

contribute to housework (Bröckel, 2018; Maurer-Fazio, Hughes, & Zhang, 2007). Nevertheless, that is far from enough. To increase women's labor force participation and advance their careers, organizations need to provide support, such as flexibility at work, inclusive organizational culture, professional training, and transparency in hiring and promoting (Arora & Sharma, 2018; Bastalich et al., 2007; Panteli, 2006). It has been found that individuals with career breaks suffer smaller penalties in states where the government generously provided social welfare for wage workers (Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2001). The overarching support is from the societal level where social welfare, vocational training, and career counseling can be improved to better the situation (Gronau, 1988).

I developed Figure 1 to represent five stages of women's support system. The five stages, as illustrated in the figure, could coexist time-wise and space-wise. For example, in contemporary China, women are faced with disparate resources in career advancement due to elements such as educational level, geographic location, family structure, organizational culture, and so on (Bauer, Wang, Riley, & Zhao, 1992; Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014; Jiang, 2020; Shu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2007; Song & Dong, 2018; Yang, Fu, & Li, 2016). Another point worth noting is that retreats could happen despite the progress being made. For example, Jones et al. (2020) found that with decades of efforts, women's wage penalty for career interruptions was less than it was for men in the 1970s; however, over the period from the 1980s to the 1990s, women's wage penalty kept soaring from 40.4 percent to 73.7 percent and finally outnumbered that of men.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Women	**Women**	**Women & Men**	**Family & Organization**	**Triangle of Family, Orgnization, and Society**
- caregivers - housemakers - secondary earners	- outsource childcare and household responsibilities -e.g. grandparents	- equal household division - mutual support	organization: - flexibility - inclusive culture - transparent hiring & promotion - professional training	society: - social welfare - vocational training - career counseling

- Different stages can co-exist timewise (meaning that at a specific time, different stages can co-exist)/
- Different stages can co-exist space-wise (meaning that at a specific location, different stages can co-exist).
- Retreats can happen (e.g., when labor surplus happen, women were encouraged to return home).

Figure 1. Stages of Women's Support System

Career Interruptions—A Socially Constructed Stigma

Scholars have been consciously using neutral terminologies such as non-linear path, frayed career, or kaleidoscope career to refer to non-traditional career types. As an essential component of a non-traditional career path, career interruptions did not receive equal scholarly attention. One possible explanation is that a career interruption is still widely perceived as a blemish in one's resume.

As mentioned before, several terms were used interchangeably with career interruptions. Those terms include career breaks (Arun et al., 2004), employment interruptions (Theunissen, Verbruggen, Forrier, & Sels, 2011), occupational career interruptions (Lovell, 2007), career gaps, broken career (Ang, 2007), extended break (Stanley, 2018), career sidestep (Theunissen et al., 2011), and unemployment spells (Theunissen et al., 2011). Broader terms include unexpected career change and the break (Herman, 2009). The implied meanings behind those terms are apparent: interrupting one's career is not a good thing. It *broke* your career path, *interrupted* your

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career advancement, and definitely needs to be fixed on your resume. If you Google career interruptions, websites will pop out, trying to teach you how to strategically explain career breaks on your resume.

In the past five years, there is a growing interest in looking into the so-called flexibility stigma (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2014; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013), which means individuals get stigmatized for utilizing flexibility at work. The existence of flexibility stigma explains why the usage of the flexibility programs (e.g., flextime and part-time schedules) is still extremely low even with decades of promotion in the organizational context. Similarly, despite the efforts made in upholding the legitimacy of non-linear and interrupted careers, career breaks are still perceived as a stigma. The career breaks, especially the extended ones, can be connected with an extremely negative professional profile: incompetent at work, irreconcilable work-life issues, irresponsibility, and replaceable. As revealed by a recent survey among hundreds of working mothers on LinkedIn, more than half of the surveyed women shared the concern that the returning mothers are not taken as seriously as their peers, and they announced that the career break stigma is real (Fairchild, 2020). Hence, in order to return, most people have to come up with an explanation to justify their time off work (Clark, 2018). In the worst situations, individuals are forced to create a distortion or fabrication for their career breaks to deal with the stigma (Neilson, 2019).

Is it true that career interruptions are entirely destructive? If we take a closer look, the impression that career interruptions are devastating does not necessarily come from the experiences. Instead, it mainly originated from the extensive reports and studies of its inseparable connection with adverse career outcomes and consequences.

Then why do people get punished when they interrupt their careers? In the 1970s, the dominant explanation was that the professional skillset depreciated over time in individuals' career breaks (Mincer, 1974; Mincer & Polachek, 1974). As time goes by, a series of empirical studies have cast doubt on the human capital depreciation interpretation. For example, Gronau (1988) found that women still suffered additional penalties for interrupting their careers compared with their male counterparts when all relevant variables were controlled. Similarly, Albrecht et al. (1999) challenged the human capital depreciation interpretation by proposing a signaling model:

> From this alternative perspective, one could interpret the strong negative relationship between time out for formal parental leave and subsequent wages that we find for men in Sweden as the outcome of a separating equilibrium. That is, one might find it worthwhile to take little or no parental leave, while less committed men find it less costly to take time out. Employers, recognizing the correlation between men's leave-taking behavior and their degree of career commitment, respond by penalizing those who take significant parental leave. The situation for women is quite different. Because the financial incentives to take one's legal entitlement of parental leave are so strong and because women have traditionally been the ones to take leave, virtually all Swedish women take substantial time off in conjunction with childbirth. Consequently, their leave-taking behavior cannot signal anything to their employers (p. 310).

The signaling interpretation reminded us that not only women, male population are also victims of the career interruption stigma. Later, Görlich and De Grip (2007) further proposed a self-selection theory which believes that women might deliberately choose female occupations

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because of its higher tolerance for flexible careers and lower wage penalties for career interruptions.

Further, human capital interpretation is questionable because of its narrow definition of skills. Notwithstanding specific work-related skills might face a knowledge gap, what about other skills? Taking women who interrupted their careers due to family reasons as an example; the simplistic approach of the human capital theory is no longer tenable because it utterly ignored the skills those women have accumulated in domestic work. In 1988, Jackson noted that "women Returners should be encouraged to include information about their skills in their cvs and employers must be encouraged to give recognition to these skills (p. 214)." His suggestion was built upon the argument as follows:

> At present, society, employers, and women themselves place no value on the skills acquired in running a home and raising a family. I am shocked when I hear a woman say that she "has not done anything during the past few years". She has, of course, been exercising interpersonal and management skills, motivating the young, controlling finances, and possibly running a transport system (Jackson, 1988, p. 213).

In a similar vein, Strickland (1988) also emphasized that:

> Its (motherhood) activities and the skills it develops can be quantified and shown to be transferable to many organizational contexts—time management, for instance, is a fine art for many mothers, who are also past mistresses in human resources management and project planning (p. 140).

Besides, decades ago, when digital technologies have not been pervasive as they are today, education or job-related qualification may depreciate due to a disconnection with the

external world and lack of training opportunities in the break period. However, with the burgeoning technological breakthroughs and innovations, individuals can learn and connect through electronic platforms and other convenient resources. Currently, scant scholarly attention has been paid to explore how those alternative channels could affect individuals' skill development and networking in a break from work.

Instead of individuals' depreciated skillset, the obstructive career outcomes of interrupted careers were largely socially constructed. As Albrecht et al. (1999) addressed, those who take career breaks may send negative signals to the employers and be perceived as less motivated. Some believed that interrupted careers went against the ideal worker stereotype, which assumed that individuals did not have family responsibilities (William, 2000). Those negative signals also influence those returners. It was found that a career break led to "a deficit in confidence, self-efficacy and opportunities to network" (Panteli, 2006, p. 144). A new perspective raised by Neilson (2019) noted that individuals tend to be secretive about the reasons behind their career breaks due to the concern of being misunderstood. However, the lack of transparency only worsens the situation by creating distrust.

This dissertation is by no means suggesting that career interruptions are positive and beneficial; instead, it aimed to achieve a balanced and healthy view of career interruptions based on a deconstruction of the implied biases and socially constructed stigma.

Women's Careers in the Chinese Context

A general picture of women's careers in the global context was given through the literature reviewed above. In this section, I will zoom in to the Chinese context and provide

essential information about Chinese women's progress and career advancement challenges from the 1980s to today.

Progress and Retreats—Four Decades of Women's Career Development

Women's studies in China blossomed in the 1980s due to nationwide economic and social reforms (Li & Zhang, 1994). At the economic level, during the late 1970s, the Chinese government was in urgent need to revitalize the economy, which was deteriorated by the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the market mechanism was introduced into the Chinese economy in the 1980s. China gradually reopened its door to the western world. The vast economic reforms have brought up many significant problems, such as employment, education, and training for the female population. From an ideological perspective, with the influx of western ideologies and thoughts, women's studies started to receive growing scholarly attention in China. While institutional-wise, in 1983, the National Women's Federation founded the first Institute of Women's Studies. Later on, it spread throughout the country and established local branches in different areas. Another prominent institute was a research center founded by Xiaojiang Li at Zhengzhou University. It was the first non-governmental research organization focusing on formal women's studies (Li & Zhang, 1994). I developed Figure 2 to present a timeline of the turning points for Chinese women. Before the 1980s, reforms and movement about women were more political-oriented, which means the conceptualization of an ideal society mostly drove the investigation about women. Since the 1980s, the institute of women's studies and the center for women's studies at Zhenzhou University have carried out extensive discussion, conferences, investigations, research, and studies explicitly focusing on the female population. Those efforts

substantially shaped women's studies in China. In the context of that, the review of women's careers in the Chinese context will choose the 1980s as the starting point.
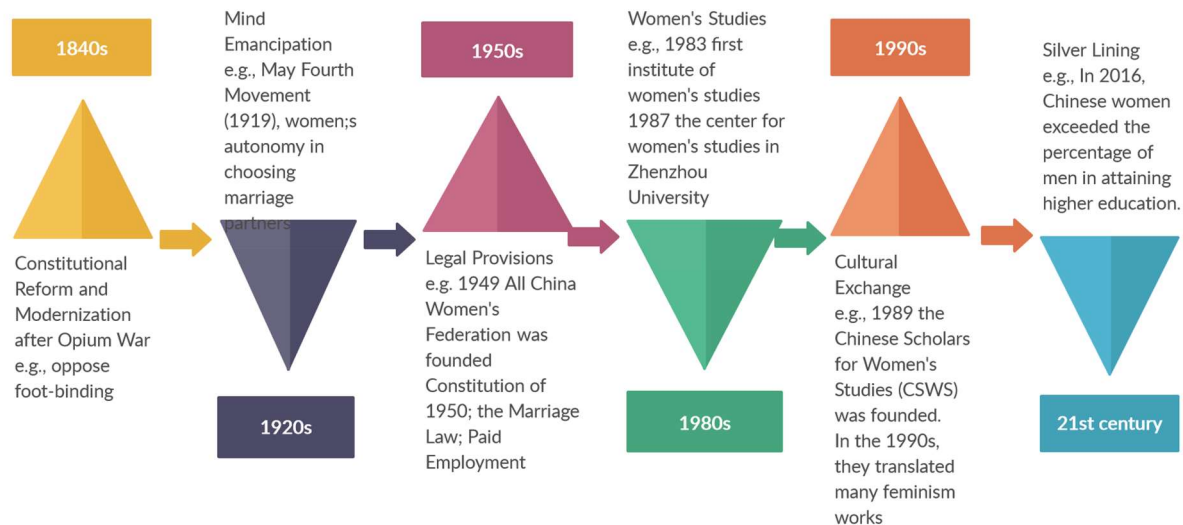
Figure 2. Turning Points for Chinese Women (1840s to 21st century)

In the 1980s, Chinese women, especially pregnant women or those with young children, were often expelled from their urban industry positions. On occasions, pregnant women were offered a so-called extended one or two-years holiday with 75 percent pay. However, most women were hesitant to take the offer because they were worried that the extended leave would lead to a permanent departure from their jobs (Jacka, 1990). The hostile environment at that time was primarily due to the labor surplus. As revealed by the Women Workers' Committee of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, among all the surplus workers in the investigated urban enterprises, 67 percent were women (Jacka, 1990). Summerfield (1994) summarized that "while the reforms in China create many gains in income and opportunity for both men and women, the costs (especially in terms of employment opportunity) fall disproportionately on women (p. 715)."

The challenges encountered by Chinese women contradicted communist values, which believe that employment plays a vital role in women's liberation. As Engels (1884) and Landes (1989) put it, women's emancipation relies on the massive social scale participation in production and the least constraints from domestic duties. Therefore, China launched a series of discussions to encourage women to participate and stay in the labor force. As indicated above, in the 1980s, both governmental and non-governmental institutes contributed a lot to women's studies, which gave prominence to many significant problems such as women's education, employment, and liberation. Nevertheless, the big picture is that when the Chinese economy transformed from a socialist planned economy to a market economy, the pre-existing reproductive and care services provided to those working for the state-owned and collective work units gradually fell on the shoulders of individual families. Women, who are stereotyped as the major caregivers, struggled again with severe work-life conflicts in their daily lives.

From the 1990s to the 2010s, scholars widely agreed that China had achieved tremendous growth in gender equality, mainly due to the decades-effort made in constitutional and legislative reforms, ideological and political movements, and centrally controlled system in employment and remuneration (many gender equality policies, such as equal pay for equal work, were essentially forced through the state-owned enterprises and collective work units) (Wang and Klugman, 2020). In those years, the International Labour Organization (ILO), a United Nations specialized agency, also played a vital role in Chinese women's career advancement. In November 1990, China ratified the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention 1951 (No. 100), ensuring equal pay for equal work among both male and female workers. Later in January 2006, China ratified the ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No.

111), in which the significance of ruling out gender-based discrimination in the workplace was pinpointed.

Despite all the efforts, it is also commonly believed that substantial inequalities still prevail in access to work and work quality due to a lack of inclusiveness and adequate protection. For example, Chinese women have been disproportionately placed in certain occupations such as health, education, hotel, wholesale and retail (Wei, 2011). As revealed by Wei (2011), "employed women mainly undertake the duties of nurturing, nursing, assisting and caring, which are a social extension of their family roles" (p. 96). Wang and Klugman (2020) also noticed that Chinese women are more likely to be engaged in lower-paid occupations, and one contributing factor to this phenomenon is the nation's transition from "a centrally controlled system to a market-oriented economy dominated by private sector employment" (p. 55). Other problems include gender discrimination in the hiring process and workplaces, the glass ceiling in promotion, and limited resources. Below I will further discuss Chinese women's careers from five aspects. They are: (a) labor force participation, (b) educational attainment, (c) career perceptions, (d) childcare, eldercare, and household division, (e) gender discrimination, inequalities, and glass ceiling; and (f) women in dual economic structure: rural versus urban.

Labor Force Participation

In a recently published article, the authors pinpointed three mechanisms that could stimulate future economic growth in China: human capital accumulation, urbanization, and labor force participation (Cao, Ho, Hu, & Jorgenson, 2020). Labor force participation is essential for women to achieve equal rights and liberation.

In 2019, the worldwide female labor force participation rate was 47 percent, which is very low compared with their male counterparts (74 percent) (International Labour Organization, 2020). The World Bank summarized the female labor force participation in China from 1990-2018 based on the data provided by the International Labour Organization (see Figure. 3). Generally speaking, in the past two decades, women's labor force participation is slowly declining in both rural and urban areas:

> Among rural females, the rates drop by about 5 points for those under age 50, with smaller but still noticeable drops for older females. Among urban females there is a substantial fall in 2015 for those in the high-school and college age groups, and a 2–3 percentage points fall for those aged 25–45 (Cao et al., 2020, p. 4).
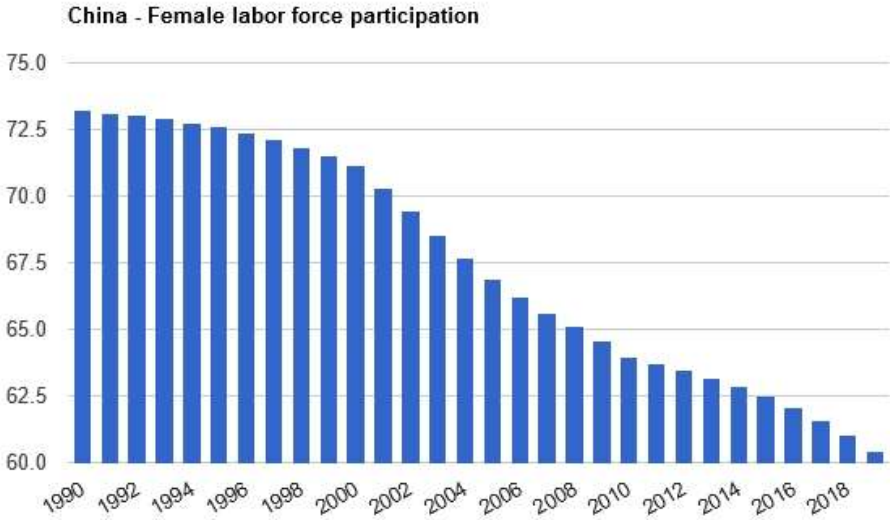
Figure 3. China's Female Labor Force Participation 1990-2018 (Source: The World Bank, retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=CN)

In China, women's labor force participation decline can be traced back to the 1980s. Back then, a series of economic reforms were implemented to revitalize the Chinese economy (Burnett, 2010; Cooke & Xiao, 2014). As Burnett (2010) stated, "overall, women had less job mobility than men and earned drastically less than men throughout the reform era, and these trends continue today" (p. 297). The situation kept worsening thereafter. In a study conducted among different ethnic groups in China, Maurer-Fazio, Hughes, and Zhang (2007) found that the investigated women, despite their different ethnicities, were all bounded by the traditional mindset that women should take their gendered household roles. The authors pinpointed that "the marriage penalty" does exist because many married women left the labor force due to household chores. As a subcategory of female labor force participation research, maternal labor force participation (MLFP) examines the prohibitors and motivators behind mothers' career decisions. Many found that grandparents, especially grandmothers, could significantly improve MLFP by taking over the household chores and childcare responsibilities (Du, Dong, & Zhang, 2019; Lee & Xiao, 1998; Maurer-Fazio, Connelly, Chen, & Tang, 2011), especially when the children were preschoolers and the access to daycare services was exceptionally limited. However, some scholars provided the other side of the story by stating that intergenerational co-residence could decrease women's labor force participation by 14 percent due to excessive eldercare (Yang, Fu, & Li, 2016). Besides, grandchildren care substantially lowered women's paid labor hours near retirement (Wang & Zhang, 2018). Both studies mentioned above have confirmed that neither eldercare nor grandchildren care would affect men's paid working hours (Wang & Zhang, 2018; Yang, Fu, & Li, 2016).

Some alerted that the monotonic decrease in women's labor force participation might have changed subtly over time because the Chinese market and economy are undergoing

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tremendous changes each year. Wu and Zhou (2015) argued that from the 1990s to the beginning of the 2000s, the decline of women's labor force participation was caused by economic reforms and the radical layoff policy of publicly-owned enterprises; while the surge of living costs in urban China had been gradually pushing women back to work.

Educational Attainment

Chinese parents perceive education as the way to desired careers. Therefore, kids are determined to pursue education for a better future under parental influences (Liu, McMahon, & Watson, 2015). It was found that education has an evident positive effect on women's labor force participation, both in rural and urban areas (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014). Compared with women with junior high school educations, illiterate women were 2.3 percentage points less likely to work. Those who received postsecondary education were 20.3 percentage points more likely to be in the labor force. The reasons might be the increasing job availability and higher retirement age for women with higher education (Maurer-Fazio, Connelly, Chen, & Tang, 2011).

In China, women's educational attainment has substantially increased in the past decades. As reported by Xinhua Net, in 2016, 50.6 percent of postgraduate students were female, which means that for the first time, women exceeded the percentage of men in attaining higher education (Xinhua Net, 2017). The reasons for the sizable increase are complicated. Jiang (2020) reported that China's one-child policy "explains about half of the increase in educational attainment for women born between 1960 and 1980, (p. 530)", which consequently leads to "delayed entry into first marriage, delayed entry to parenthood and increased labor supply (p.530)."

Lu (2000) alerted that our attention should not be limited to higher education. Adult and vocational higher education could be complementary modes of higher education for the female population since the flexibility of vocational higher education could meet the needs of women who were constrained by their traditional roles.

Career Perceptions

Individuals' career perceptions can often be traced back to their childhood when their career curiosity of job types and responsibilities was intentionally or unintentionally taught by the parents (Liu, McMahon, & Watson, 2015). In China, parents tend to pass on career gender stereotypes to their children. For example, girls are often told that they do not suit high-risk careers such as firefighters and police officers and boys are not a good fit for nursing and teaching (Liu, McMahon, & Watson, 2015). Based on 70 in-depth interviews with urban Chinese young women, Zhou (2020) recently noted that maternal employment could positively influence the next generation's career perceptions by moralizing mothers' wage work. That being said, for girls growing up with working mothers, they will find working as a mom more acceptable. Similarly, men who grew up with working mothers are more likely to understand and support a working wife (Chen & Ge, 2018).

Traditionally, the self-identity of Chinese women was closely connected with that of husband and children. Therefore, husbands' or children's success was often perceived as women's accomplishments and fulfillment (Cheung & Liu, 2003). Before marriage, both men and women expect traditional gender roles, with women handling more household chores (Bu & McKeen, 2000). Under this circumstance, work and family roles could heavily influence Chinese women's psychological well-being (Lai, 1995).

Chinese women perceive getting more education as strategic career tactics. However, although Chinese women were more determined to learn and do their current job well compared with their male counterparts (Granrose, 2007), their career perceptions and values are still highly restricted by the deeply rooted gender roles. It was found that the Chinese husbands' employment "is more strongly related to individual happiness of both the husband and the wife than wife's employment" (Qian & Qian, 2015, p. 61).

Childcare, Eldercare, and Household Division

Since the 1980s, the gender wage gap was widened due to market-driven economic decisions (Yang, Fu, & Li, 2016). In most cases, husbands are perceived as the primary earners, whereas wives are the secondary earners (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014; Cooke, 2005; Turner, 2006). Feminist economists contend that women have long been stereotyped as the major caregivers, and the gender patterns of labor division are socially constructed (Liu, Dong, & Zheng, 2010). In a similar vein, Chen and Ge (2018) stated that men's gender role preferences could influence the social norms, consequently affecting female labor force participation. In China, an increasing number of men grew up with non-working mothers in the last decades. The so-called "mother-in-law's effect" could deteriorate men's willingness and capability of participating in household chores and their perceptions regarding women's roles in society (Chen & Ge, 2018).

Unarguably, household chores are one driving factor for women to leave the labor force and return home (Maurer-Fazio, Hughes, and Zhang, 2007). Song and Dong (2018) found that childcare costs negatively affect women's labor force participation. The situation is even worse for migrant mothers (those who move from rural to urban areas) who have minimal access to affordable childcare services and external support. In a similar vein, Maurer-Fazio and his

coworkers (2011) revealed that for women with preschoolers (aged 0-5), the labor force

participation was reduced by 4.2 percentage points compared to those with older children. To be

more specific, Chen, Zhao, Fan, and Coyte (2017) divided caregivers into two groups: caregivers

and intensive caregivers (those who provided more than 15 or 20 hours of caregiving per week)

and found that intensive caregivers have significantly lower hours of work per week.

The situation of eldercare is complicated. In some circumstances, women who make

work adjustments for informal eldercare have to suffer from income and benefits penalty (Fast,

William, & Keating, 1999). Chinese women were put between their older parents and their

young children and constantly struggled with excessive household chores (Liu, Dong, & Zheng,

2010). Meanwhile, some argued that the substantial assistance in housekeeping and childcare

offered by parents and parents-in-law could benefit women's labor force participation (Lee &

Xiao, 1998). It was found that co-residency with parents or parents-in-law could increase

women's likelihood to participate in the labor force by 6.6 percentage points (Maurer-Fazio,

Connelly, Chen, & Tang, 2011). A recent study echoed previous findings by stating that "on

average, co-residence or nearby residence with parents significantly increases women's work

time by 20-26 hours per week" (Shen, Yan, & Zeng, 2016, p. 645).

Despite all the positive sides, eldercare could still be a heavy burden. First, co-residence

with elders also means a heavier burden on medical costs and healthcare (Shen et al., 2016).

Secondly, there is also a significant difference between taking care of parents and parents-in-law:

the eldercare of parents does not clearly affect women's employment status or working hours. In

contrast, informal eldercare of parents-in-law could significantly decrease women's hours of paid

work by 3.8 to 6.4 hours per week (Liu et al., 2010). Lastly, due to urban housing reform, the

increasing availability of new residential housing, and the pension system, China has witnessed a

decline in co-residency among urban elders and their children. Without external support from parents or parents-in-law, women choose to work are faced with a "double burden" precisely because their traditional roles in the household remain the same (Chen et al., 2017; Summerfield, 1994).

Gender Discrimination, Inequalities, and Glass Ceiling

In China, gender discrimination prevails in everyday life due, in part, to its Confucian values, which support a strong hierarchy system based on gender and age (Bauer, Wang, Riley, & Zhao, 1992). In an organizational setting, women's career advancement was also highly restricted compared with their male counterparts. From the gendered organization perspective, women's career advancement was sacrificed for organizational goals (Acer, 2006). The 1980s economic reforms in China led to the market-driven economy, which worsened the gender inequalities at work. Burnett (2010) provided a viable explanation:

> Gender discrimination in China from the 1990s through today is visible in hiring, dismissal, earlier retirement, fines for violation of family planning regulations, wage differences, denial of certain social welfare benefits, and sexual harassment. Laws and regulations that are meant to protect women require employers to provide female employees with expensive benefits related to maternity, child care, and basic gender differences (whether biological or merely perceived), making female employees much more expensive to employ than male employees. These regulations force women to retire at an earlier age than men, and this leaves them with lower pensions even when men's and women's benefits are supposedly the same (p. 298).

Further, in the late 1990s, when the economic globalization profoundly influenced the Chinese economy, gender inequalities were compounded by the nature of job queues (upgrading certain jobs while downgrading others). Under these circumstances, Chinese men were more likely to be placed in prestigious positions in foreign firms and joint ventures; nevertheless, Chinese women fluxed into the export-oriented manufacturing industries where they are relatively under-paid (Shu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2007).

The glass ceiling for career women is a global phenomenon, even though gender diversity in the management team could effectively help organizations achieve better financial outcomes (Krishnan & Park, 2005). In China, the managerial level representation of women has generally improved over the decades. According to the 2011 Grant Thornton International Business Report, the number of Chinese women holding the title of CEO doubled the global average in 2011. However, even those who made it to the top are still constantly challenged with gaining legitimacy and proving their suitability on the top management team (Liu, 2013). Not to mention that as many as 53 percent of Chinese women were still constrained in their lower-level positions (Liu, 2013).

Women in Dual Economic Structure: Rural versus Urban

For decades, it has become evident that there are structural differences between the rural and urban female populations in China. Generally speaking, women in rural areas are more constrained by the conception that women's rights and autonomy were unconditionally submerged under male authority (Nagi, 2004). In rural China, battered women utilize the strategy of "enduring violence" instead of divorce when coping with domestic violence due to their inferior status in resource control (Liu & Chan, 1999). Career-wise, it was found that women's decisions to work in rural areas were more influenced by their husbands' occupations and

earnings. In contrast, women in urban areas are more financially independent. In terms of family businesses in rural areas, men are more involved in developing and expanding household business, whereas women are increasingly pushed into agricultural activities (Entwisle, Henderson, Short, Bouma, & Zhai, 1995).

Relatively speaking, rural women have an advantage when it comes to having support for childcare. For urban women, childcare plays a more antagonistic role in women's labor force participation. In contrast, for rural women, who are more likely to have residence proximity to their families, the childcare burden can be alleviated through the external support provided by relatives or siblings (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014).

In the dual economic structure, there exists a group of women who are called the migration female workers or female migrant workers. The migrant women leave their rural homes behinds and migrate to cities for better pay and more job opportunities (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014; Song & Dong, 2018). The women are vulnerable and marginalized groups suffering from inhumane working conditions, ill-treatment, and precarious employment system due to a lack of social and labor protections (Ngai, 2004). As Nagi (2004) concluded, "as half-peasants, half-workers, migrant labourers have ambiguous citizenship rights and weak bargaining power. They are forced to leave the city if they lose their job, no matter how long they have been working there" (p. 30).

Need for Qualitative Inquiry about Chinese Women's Career Interruptions

As mentioned above, women's labor force participation in China has been declining in the past decades. With that being said, many Chinese women chose to exit their career tracks at certain points in life. However, we know very little about the stories behind those career

decisions. Under these circumstances, we are in urgent need of an exploratory study about Chinese women's career interruption experiences to help address questions such as why did they opt out, what motivated them to go back, how do they perceive and feel about career interruptions, what challenges and supports did they encounter, and how the career interruptions changed their career trajectories?

The existing literature of Chinese women's careers was produced primarily based on quantitative data; the conceptualization and qualitative exploration are very limited. Even more scant literature pointedly looked into Chinese women's career interruptions. An exception to that is a qualitative study recently conducted by Shen and Jiang (2020), who found that after implementing the two-children policy, women who decided to have a second child are faced with disparate career outcomes. Some were faced with interrupting their career due to a lack of social support. Only "urban singleton daughters who received tremendous parental support" (p. 1) could experience career upward mobility despite having a second child. The study did help us better understand the possible antecedents of Chinese women's career interruptions. However, due, in part, to the fact that career interruption is only one aspect of the researched topic, the article mentioned above could not dig deeper into the core of women's career interruptions.

This dissertation aimed to fill the gap by closely looking into Chinese women's career interruptions through a grounded theory approach. With a better understanding of Chinese women's career interruptions, new knowledge could be added to the research about Chinese women's labor force participation, career perceptions, career trajectories, work-family interface, organizational gender policy, and the national socioeconomic status.

Career Theories for Interrupted Careers

In this section, I will discuss several career theories and models—*protean career theory, boundaryless career theory, career construction theory, frayed career theory,* and *kaleidoscope career model*. These theoretical frameworks are included because they are the most frequently cited in the career interruptions literature.

Protean Career Theory

"The career of the 21st century will be protean" (Hall, 1996, p. 8), declared by Douglas T. Hall in 1996. The conceptualization of protean challenged traditional views about a career in multiple ways: (a) organizational career is replaced by individual career. Hall (1996) stated that a protean career, when compared with traditional careers, is driven by individuals instead of organizations. The rapid shift in the external environment calls for individuals to choose, alter, and reinvent their careers in response to changes. (b) Change of contract. There was a long-existing invisible contract between employees and organizations. In an old contract, organizations pay job security in return for employees' hard-working and years of commitment. The contract is different now. In the protean career, the ultimate goal of the career is achieving psychological success ("the feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from achieving one's most important goals in life, be they achievement, family happiness, inner peace, or something else,") instead of vertical success ("climbing the corporate pyramid and making a lot of money," p. 8). (c) Change of path. Hall (1996) proposed that in contemporary society, career growth can be achieved through work-challenges and relationships instead of formal training and retraining programs. (e) Change of means. Continuous learning and identity changes become a significant means to the end. Hall (1996) sees a career as a combination of short

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learning stages. To equip oneself against the competitive environment, everyone needs to be capable of learn-how instead of know-how.

As Hall (2002) addressed, career theories such as protean career has replaced the path to the top "by what Herb Shepard (1984) called the path with a heart" (p. 34). Protean career theory is seminal in the field and was paradigm-shifting at the time of its publication. Later, Hall's work precipitated many theoretical propositions such as boundaryless career theory, frayed career theory, and many other career theories I will further discuss in the following sections.

Reitman and Schneer (2003) found that women follow both promised career path ("uninterrupted, upward climb on a corporate ladder," p. 60) and a protean path. This is supported by a study by Valcour and Ladge (2008) in which a hybrid of traditional and protean career logics was found in women's subjective career success. Waters (2008) emphasized that the protean career attitude can assist with reemployment quality, psychological health, and job growth, which is essential in dealing with job loss, unemployment, and career breaks.

Boundaryless Career Theory

Boundaryless career, interpreted as transcending of organizational boundaries, is often discussed simultaneously with protean career. Nevertheless, they are quite different in spirit. Protean career speaks highly of individuals' inner strength and encourages self-agents to pursue their careers based on inherent values. Whereas boundaryless career looks for the possibility of transferring from one field to another and welcoming new challenges. Their similarities lie within the thinking of providing alternatives for traditional organizational careers. Nevertheless, Arthur (1994) admitted that an organizational career is still "the legitimate base of inquiry" (p. 197). The concept of a boundaryless career seems to be very broad when it was first proposed in

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the 1990s. Arthur (1994) highlighted six situations in which a career can be perceived as boundaryless: (a) when a career "moves cross the boundaries of separate employers"; (b) when a career "draws validation-and marketability-from outside the present employer"; (c) when a career "is sustained by extra-organizational networks or information"; (d) "when traditional organizational career boundaries, notably hierarchical reporting and advancement principles, are broken"; (e) "when a person rejects existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons"; (f) career actor who "may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints" (p. 296). Later on, Arthur and Rousseau (1996) constructed their definition of a boundaryless career within those six emphases. Furthermore, Sullivan (1999) generalized those six inherent categories of boundaryless career theory as follows: occupational boundary transitions, organizational boundary transitions, changes in employment relationships, networks, inter-role transitions, and intra-role transitions. Drawing from scholarly works about firm competencies, Defillippi and Arthur (1994) also introduced three career competencies: *know-why*, *know-who,* and *know whom* to guide boundaryless career practice and research. Know-why competencies address issues of "career motivation, personal meaning, and identification" (p.308). Know-how competencies are more skill-related and underline career-relevant skills, knowledge, and capabilities. While the last element of the competency-based perspective of the boundaryless career is knowing-whom, which relates to networking and communication.

Traditional non-interrupted linear career ideology rejects career interruptions; in contrast to that, the new protean and boundaryless careers would rather see career breaks as an integrated part of career development (Reitman & Schneer, 2005). To be flexible enough to embrace new career types, the boundaryless career breaks the constraints of employers, networks, principles, opportunities, and structures for individual growth and self-fulfillment. The inclusive nature of

the boundaryless career theory makes it well-suited to professionals taking non-traditional career paths.

By interviewing women working in the entertainment industry, Ensher et al. found that the qualities led to career success, especially in a boundaryless environment, are "strong self-management skills and high emotional intelligence" (Ensher, Murphy, & Sullivan, 2002, p.247). Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2011) also noted that independent thinking and self-management are necessary. They raised the concept of *opt-in between*, which points to the fact that "many mothers neither opt-in nor opt-out but successfully function in between those choices" (p. 331-332). Those mothers productively managed their boundaryless careers through working flexible hours or part-time and running home-based entrepreneurial endeavors. Besides, they also fit into three career competencies: knowing why, knowing how, and knowing whom. Presumably, Cabrera (2007) called attention to the invisible boundaries for women attempting to choose the boundaryless career, based on the proposition that their career competencies might have been undermined by taking a career break. For example, the know-how competency will deteriorate during a break period because of skill depreciation and a lack of resources for acquiring new skills.

Frayed Career Theory

Extending the focus on non-linear and interrupted careers and incorporating age and gender challenges, Sabelis (2010) initially used the word *rhythmicity* to explain women's career trajectories at different life stages. *Rhythmicity* indicates that "a career is considered the preferable route for a good work-life design, including of the needs of one's social context (children, parents, friends and neighbors)" (p.12). Sabelis and Schilling (2013) noted that career theories, such as boundaryless career, protean career, flexible career, and kaleidoscope career,

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still imply certain linearity. To shatter the constraints set by the "normativity of careers as linear" (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013, p. 129), they proposed the idea of a *frayed career* as an extension of *rhythmicity*. Frayed career focus on the cycles of women's working life, including "productive and reproductive phases and punctuating times for different activities and paces" (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013, p.129). The word *frayed* implies that the career, as part of the life course, is complicated, irregular, and unpredictable. The contribution of frayed career is to underscore the fact that career is constantly disrupted and to challenge the assumption of linearity and upward mobility deeply rooted in many career concepts.

By interviewing female professionals who were out of work for at least two years, Herman (2015) further developed the concept of frayed career by underlining three career narratives: rebooting, rerouting, and retreating. Rebooting incorporates a sense of continuity, which highlights the desire to reenter the professional community. Rerouting calls for tremendous change, which often requires credential and skill-building. While retreating, as the third narrative, was a compromise between competing roles and conflicting responsibilities. Those three career narratives call attention to the inherent "desire for a more defined and linear career route" (Herman, 2015, p. 334) held by many.

Career Construction Theory

Career construction theory creatively incorporated three pivotal theories: "(1) individual differences in traits, (2) developmental tasks and coping strategies, and (3) psychodynamic motivation" (Savickas, 2004, p. 42). For Savickas, a better understanding of the self-making process is fundamental while making sense of career choices. Therefore, he categorized existing career theories into three types: *self as object* (e.g., Holland's theory of vocational choices and work environments), *self as subject* (e.g., Super's life-span life-space theory), and *self as project*

(e.g., Savickas's career construction theory). Self as project means that each work is more like a project for individuals to fulfill in a specific time range. Savickas (2013) pointed out that working in a single organization for decades has been replaced by the new working style that manages occupational transitions through lifelong learning. The theoretical underpinning of career construction theory is contextualism, which views career as "driven by adaptation to an environment rather than by maturation of inner structures" (p. 147). Individuals go through three phases while constructing their career: *self as actor*, *self as agent,* and *self as author*. At the first stage, individuals construct their roles and responsibilities, and they will utilize their roles at the second stage in different communities. Finally, they can illustrate and explain their occupational experiences.

Due to its focus on the meaning-making process, career construction theory was widely used in exploring individuals' career decisions. Anding (2011) echoed career construction theory by noting that under cultural and societal influences, women made intentional career transitions. Another good example of this might be Görlich and DeGript's (2009) study about the relationship between women's career choices and occupational gender segregation. They found that high-skilled women might intentionally choose female occupations because of the lower wage penalty for taking family-related career interruptions. In a similar vein, Landivar (2014) emphasized that there is significant occupational variation in deciding to opt-out. For example, women working in managerial professions are less likely to exit; instead, they will choose to work reduced hours to strike a balance between work and life. Those aforementioned empirical studies echoed the implicit contextualism of career construction theory.

Kaleidoscope Career Model

The highlight of contextualism and individual interpretation of one's career is also traceable in the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM), which was proposed by Lisa A. Mainiero and Sherry E. Sullivan (2005). Emerging from the profound concern about women's way of constructing their careers, the KCM creatively pinpointed *authenticity*, *balance,* and *challenge* as crucial elements that drive women to shift the pattern and rearrange their roles in work and life. The KCM was supported by a study by Cabrera (2007) in which career women were found to shift their focus overtime to balance work and life. As the first empirical tests of the KCM, Cabrera's work shed light on the application of the KCM in looking at changes in career focus at different stages. Women in early and mid-career found the balance to be the focus, while in late career, the focus shifts towards the challenge.

Building upon a close examination of women's opting-out experiences, the KCM is seen as the first innovative model that can help explain women's non-linear career trajectories. Later on, Sullivan and Mainiero (2008) further developed the KCM by proposing relevant HRD programs that can be implemented to address the complexities of women's careers. Suggestions were given such as providing structured policies that allow career interruptions of one or two years, giving "paid short-term corporate sabbaticals (two months) to pursue community services and activities" (p.38), and encouraging former employees to "return as members of an alumni network at some later point" (p.39). Drawing from protean career theory and the KCM, Cabrera (2009) suggested the organizations adapt to evolving circumstances by reshaping their focus from face time to results. For those who need self-fulfillment outside of organizational boundaries, they might choose kaleidoscope entrepreneurial careers (Sullivan et al., 2007).

A Call for A New Conceptualization

In the career interruption literature, there exist a number of widely cited career theories such as the protean career theory (Hall, 1996, 2002), boundaryless career theory (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), happenstance theory (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999), career construction theory (Savickas, 2004, 2013), and frayed career theory (Sabelis, 2010; Sabelis & Schilling, 2013). The theories mentioned above, along with other theoretical propositions such as a multi-dimensional career (Baruch, 2004), kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), flexible career (Grote & Raeder, 2009), patchwork career (Halrynjo, 2010), and careerscapes (McKie, Biese, & Jyrkinen, 2013), provided diverse lenses through which individuals could approach and navigate through career interruptions. Yet, efforts need to be made to extend or modify existing theories to better understand career interruptions.

First, the existing career theories were framed within the western mindset, which put emphasis on raising consciousness and empowering individuals' ability to interfere instead of letting psychic processes unfold naturally (Coward, 1985). The neglection of the role of intuition in western therapy has attracted scholarly attention from renowned theorists such as Carl Rogers, Carl Gustav Jung, and Abraham Maslow, who innovatively introduced eastern philosophy into the western therapy practices to reduce the psychological intensity (Maslow, 1966, 1979; Rogers, 1973; Wilhelm & Jung, 1931). However, these scholars' ingenious expansion of western methods was largely neglected in the career counseling field. For example, the happenstance theory emphasized unplanned career events and it provided a new perspective through which career counselors and individuals can approach unanticipated events more positively. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (1999) encouraged individuals to engage in exploratory activities so that unplanned events can turn into learning opportunities. However, these theories only provided one

possible solution by perceiving individuals as active interveners. Meanwhile, the possibility of taking the appreciator stance has been ignored and subordinated.

Second, the existing theoretical frameworks such as career construction theory (Savickas, 2004, 2013) and kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), mainly explore the decision-making and meaning-making processes that lead to a career break, rather than the real attributes of career breaks themselves. Besides, the existing career theories provide similar counseling strategies for career counselors to assist their career-interrupted clients. What is absent in the proposed strategies is the affirmation of the strategic non-action, and the *let be* attitude. The fundamental reason for this neglect is that none of the theories mentioned above touched on or tried to approach the ontological aspects of unplanned career events such as career interruptions. That is, no existing theories help reveal the attributes of career interruptions.

Third, without an ontological shift, career interruption stigma will persist. Suppose the conception of career interruptions remains unmodified. In that case, the guidance provided by career counselors in terms of dealing with career interruptions is essentially no different from the pop-up window teaching people how to make their broken careers look more appealing. Previous theoretical frameworks such as the career construction theory and the KCM framework (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) focus on individuals' capabilities to address and respond to career changes. The mindset could potentially intensify the widely existing career interruption stigma through blame-shifting. The one-sided accentuation of individuals' capabilities and resources could shadow other influencers of career interruptions and the socially constructed process of the stigma.

Additionally, there is a lack of specificity. Career theories such as the happenstance theory (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999), are likely to confound career interruptions with

other types of career transitions, such as career change from one field to another. Perceiving career interruptions as one type of career transition is very likely to overshadow the uniqueness of career interruptions. The distinctive nature of career interruptions has not yet been given adequate scholarly attention. First, career interruptions, especially long interruptions over several years, are viewed as a stigma for professionals. Although it might be concealable or explained, the stigma deteriorates individuals' mental confidence and self-efficacy. Second, as opposed to other career transitions, such as moving from one field to another, a career interruption is a period of disconnection. The non-employment status during career breaks disconnects individuals from their professional network, social support, and financial security. Third, unlike other career transitions, the conception of career breaks is often entangled with gender stereotypes, as manifested in the KCM conceptual framework. Although women are more likely to take career interruptions compared with their male counterparts, this one-sided theoretical perspective may expose career men to unforeseeable challenges or unintended consequences when they take career breaks. In sum, existing theoretical explanations (e.g., protean career theory, frayed career theory, and career construction theory) for a broken career have been adaptations of general and broad career theories examining one's whole career life, but this is an insufficient perspective to reveal the specific nature of career breaks.

Chinese Taoism and Proposition Development

It is not new to apply Taoist principles to western therapy, such as family interventions and person-centered therapy (Jordan, 1985; Moss & Perryman, 2012; O'Byrne, 1990). However, there is a dearth of similar discussion and application in the career counseling field. *Tao* (translated as "way"), one of the key concepts embraced by Chinese Taoism, refers to the source of all things and is nearly untraceable. Lao-tzu, who is the founder of Taoism, implied that there

is not a constant *Tao*; therefore, *Tao* is essentially nameless. Another distinguishing characteristic of Taoism is the so-called *Reversal* such as *Yin* and *Yang*. Lao-tzu built a universe in which every situation or format could revert to its reversal status. For example, strong could revert into weak, soft could revert into hard, and non-being could revert into being. The chain of oppositions constitutes *Yin* and *Yang* and thus creates the flow of virtues. Guided by spontaneous motion, things can harmonize by themselves. Lao-tzu wanted to call attention to the obscured virtues, especially the status of *Wu* (无). As Graham (1989) stated, "the most startling of the reversals is the elevation of Nothing above Something" (p. 225).

Taoism, a prominent traditional Chinese philosophy, has received scant scholarly attention in the career development field despite its wide application in western therapy (Moss & Perryman, 2012) and the management field (Lee, Han, Byron, & Fan, 2008; Lee & Hansen, 2009). Below I will introduce several Taoism conceptions to reconstruct career interruptions.

Wu (无), often translated as *non-being*, is the opposite of *Yu* (有). In line with the Taoism law of reversion, which holds onto the belief that arriving at one extreme will revert to the opposite extreme, the concept of *Wu* (non-being) can arrive at its opposite end *Yu* (being) under certain circumstances. Simply put, *Wu* and *Yu* cannot exist or occur without the other, and *Wu* can sometimes be transformed into *Yu*. This is in line with Taoism Yin-Yang philosophy, which captures "how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent" (Patton, 2019, p. 88). As Kaltenmark (1965) emphasized, *Wu* "is a superior mode of being; it is also the void, but we shall see that in Lao Tzu's conception the void harbors within itself all potentialities" (p. 34). Lao Tzu (1891/1997) once compared the empty space within a door or a window to the concept of *Wu* in *Tao-te Ching* (a classic Taoism text written by Lao Tzu):

The thirty spokes unite in the one nave, but it is on the empty space (for the axle) that the use of the wheel depends. Clay is fashioned into vessels, but it is on their empty hollowness that their use depends. The door and windows are cut out (from the walls) to form an apartment, but it is on the empty space (within) that its use depends. Therefore, what has a (positive) existence serves for profitable adaptation, and what has not that for (actual) usefulness.

According to Lao Tzu, the existence of the wheel, vessels, doors, and windows all hinge on the emptiness within those objects. In other words, *Wu* (non-being) creatively produces *Yu* (being). Izutsu (1983) also stated that the linear thinking process would not work well with Taoism concepts. Instead, we need to look at *Wu* and *Yu* as an organic whole. Drawing on the literature, I developed four propositions about career interruptions. The propositions, guided by Chinese Taoism philosophy, aims to reveal the attributes of career interruptions.

Proposition 1. A career break itself is neutral. It is how to manage career interruptions that might lead to constructive or destructive career outcomes.

One essential principle of Chinese Taoism is polarity, which denotes the interplay between *Yin* and *Yang*. In Chinese Taoism, polarity does not mean the interplay between irreconcilable or conflicting parties. Instead, it implies the cyclic process in which *yin* and *yang* mutually and naturally give way and rise to one another. Viewing career trajectories from the Taoism polarity perspective, the status of being employed can be *yang*, whereas the career interruption period is *yin*. They both are manifestations of individuals' career life. Therefore, career interruptions simply represent the status of non-being. It is neither positive nor negative. For those who take advantage of career breaks to reorient their career path, build their credentials, or muster the energy for a needed change, career interruptions could be constructive

and meaningful. Introducing Taoism into the career interruption literature points to future research that does not presume career breaks are detrimental.

Several reasons lie behind the commonly held perception that career interruptions are detrimental. First, there is an assumption that career breaks lead to adverse career outcomes. There is an implicit fallacy in the career interruptions literature, which assumes that we should blame adverse career outcomes that emerge after a career break on the choice or action of taking a career break. However, two sequential events do not necessarily indicate an inherent causal relationship. Furthermore, taking career breaks might have once fallen into this assumption because disconnection from work could critically undermine one's credentials and network, which would eventually damage one's career in the long run. However, we are now in an era where many have easy access to online training, social media, and flexible employment opportunities. Taking a break from previous employment no longer means isolating oneself from the outside world. Second, career breaks come along with tremendous changes, which very likely leads to resistance, stress, and anxiety. Third, individuals are not taught to manage their career interruptions. Instead of teaching people how to navigate through their career interruptions, many empirical studies implicitly suggest that professionals avoid interrupting their careers, even though we are living in a world where "we hardly ever meet people with 'smooth' careers" (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013, p.129).

Proposition 2. The simplicity and vacancy of career breaks, just like the Taoism conception of *Wu*, harbor within itself all potentialities.

A linear, uninterrupted, and upward career path can lead to success, but it might also obscure other possibilities of one's career alternatives. As Kaltenmark (1965) noted, "Wu is not the same as nothingness, and wu-wei is not an ideal of absolute inaction; on the contrary, it is a

particularly efficacious attitude since it makes all doing possible" (p. 53). Taking a career break opens up new possibilities because it provides professionals with buffer time to acquire new skills, objectives, and self-concept, which are essential for a new beginning (Anding, 2011; Herman, 2015).

The potentialities of career breaks include but are not limited to (a) a change in one's field (such as profession, occupational field, or specialty); (b) a change in one's skillset (such as the accumulation of new skills or advancement of preexisting skills); (c) a change in goals and expectations (such as salary, position, title, self-image, and self-fulfillment) (d) a change in one's environment (such as co-workers and team, organizations and countries); or (e) a change in one's mental model and paradigm (such as values, motivation, and satisfaction). These changes could be either positive or negative, depending on many factors that are either predictable or unforeseeable.

Career breaks have long been viewed as adverse, detrimental, and disadvantageous. Without shifting our mental paradigm about career breaks, the effectiveness of organizational support and national policies is open to question. According to a report published by the American Journal of Public Health (Zagorsky, 2017), despite tremendous efforts put into the legislation of paid maternal/paternal leaves across the country, the number of people taking maternal/paternal leaves was pretty static from 1994 to 2015. Individuals' trying to avoid career breaks deny that career breaks commonly exist. Even for those who take advantage of favorable policies, the idea of a career break has still been heavily influenced by this negative mental paradigm. For example, it was found that in Belgian, women were likely to feel they did not deserve career breaks; therefore, they used legal career breaks to manage housework and childcare (Frey, 2014). Based on this evidence, before exploring any redesign in terms of policy

and structure, dealing with stigma and bias attached to career interruptions is of paramount importance. The paradigm shift presented here also creatively responds to the call in the literature for reexamining the status of unemployment. As Waters (2008) put it, "unemployment needs to be reconceptualized as an event that occurs within a person's career, rather than as an event that places the person outside of his/her career path" (p. 331).

Proposition 3. Wu-Wei (i.e., strategic non-action), often seen during the interruption period, is an essential part of one's well-being and self-growth.

Wu-Wei, an idea growing out of the conception of *Wu*, refers to a strategic non-action. As Lau Tzu stated, "the highest attainment is *wu-wei* and is purposeless" (*Tao-te Ching*, Chapter 38). The conception of *wu-wei* helps better understand the stigmatization of career interruptions.

By and large, the career interruption stigma arose from the mental mode believing that non-action is meaningless and inefficacious. Taking no action, for many, equals dropping back and being replaced. Nowadays, the rejection of a non-action status was further compounded by the rapid-shifting external environment and the constantly changing standards for professional competency.

It is crucial to establish an affirmation of strategic non-action because the long-existing denial of non-action might further deteriorate some career-related psychological problems. Unlike career men and women climbing their career ladders, individuals in the break period often feel disoriented, thus are eager to find a way out. The feeling of disorientation and eagerness gradually evolved into anxiety and excessive concern for one's future —the situation brought forth some psychological problems such as anxiety and self-doubt. Meanwhile, existing career theories such as career construction theory advise individuals to take the initiative and get

back on track. The underlying assumption is that individuals could figure things out and gain substantial self-growth by transferring the non-action status into the action status. The assumption sometimes would worsen the situation when individuals are experiencing shame, guilt, and self-doubt yet are incapable of making any changes at that instant.

In precis, what is missing in the existing theories is the affirmation of the so-called strategic non-action. Recently, Verbruggen and De Vos (2020) proposed an idea of career inaction, which was defined as "the failure to act sufficiently over some period of time on a desired change in one's career" (p. 376). To my best knowledge, this is the first attempt in the career development literature that draws attention to the status of non-action. But still, the theory of career inaction perceives the non-action status negatively: career inaction is viewed as when people fail to act sufficiently towards their desired outcomes.

The conception of *wu-wei* helps provide alternative ways to perceive non-action status in career lives. Actually, psychologists put a lot of effort into digging into the art of doing nothing. The work, ranging from mind wandering to the brain's default network, suggested that non-action is normal and essential for one's well-being and self-growth. In line with that, *Wu-wei* pinpoints the necessity of living in harmony with what is and the possibility of achieving more by doing less, thus directing individuals to rethink career non-action differently. Therefore, noninterfering therapy, which has gained recognition in family intervention and person-centered therapy, is likely to be a highly appropriate strategy for communicating with individuals experiencing career breaks.

Proposition 4. Instead of a breaking point in a linear path, career interruptions can be viewed as an integral component of a cyclic motion.

The traditional mindset perceives career interruptions as breaking points in a linear path, thus imply the necessity to bridge or fix them. Later, career theories such as the protean theory, boundaryless theory, and frayed theory made one step further by viewing different career stages as patches woven together. Career interruption, a unique patch, co-waves the career map patterns with other career experiences. Nevertheless, what is missing is a *returning* and *cyclic* mindset.

Depart from the Western linear irreversible time; traditional Chinese culture holds a cyclic view of time and a returning process mindset. According to Lao Tzu, returning is the motion of the Tao. O'Byrne (1990) explained that "as the seasons of the year, they are circular, each the cause and effect of the other, flowing and returning in a cyclic system of interacting and interdependent parts" (p. 33). The Taoism philosophical system manifested the cyclic time stance, in which yin and yang form a circle that creates a forever fluid process.

The Taoism cyclic view of time could improve understanding of career interruptions by introducing the temporal dimensions. Career breaks, viewed from the cyclic time perspective, are integral components of the cyclic circle of career development. In the fluid process, career breaks are not only outcomes of previous career choices but also antecedents of the upcoming career incidents. Therefore, career interruption is not a disconnection between two phrases. Instead, it is an inherent stage embraced by a non-stop cyclic motion.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed three bodies of literature: the conceptualization and empirical studies of career interruptions, women's careers in the Chinese context, and career theories for interrupted careers. Building upon that, I proposed a new conceptualization of career interruptions informed by the Chinese Taoism perspective.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This chapter introduces the design of the study. I begin by discussing the characteristics of qualitative research and the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach for my study. Next, I present the methodology—constructivist grounded theory—based on a brief review of the relevant literature and my philosophical stance. I then describe the methods for data collection and analysis in detail. Finally, I address the issue of quality control.

Qualitative Research

This section describes qualitative research from two aspects: the nature and characteristics of qualitative research and of the human instrument. Building upon that, I explain the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach for the present study.

The Nature and Characteristics of Qualitative Research

In their classic work titled *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln (2007) defined qualitative research as follows:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. (p. 4)

Due to the inquisitive and exploratory nature of qualitative research, it has great potential for pointing researchers in new directions for future study. Silverman (2016) characterized qualitative research as "a theoretically driven enterprise" and complements quantitative research "in particular by entering into the 'black box' of how social phenomena are constituted in real

time" (p. 3). As a vibrant approach, qualitative research is not necessarily constrained to social science. For example, as Lewontin and Levins (1998) noted:

> In tests of relativity theory, the overthrow of parity, the confirmation of the Mendelian 3:1 ratio in genetics, and the prediction of the existence of the planet Neptune from anomalies in the orbit of Uranus, precise measurement has been critical. But even here, the important conclusions have not been quantitative but rather qualitative or semi-quantitative: that gravitation can affect light, that genetic traits segregate, that there is something else out there beyond Uranus. (p. 86)

For a long time, the definition and explanation of qualitative research has been presented in contrast to quantitative research, and the two approaches have been perceived as contrasting and incompatible (Barnham, 2015). However, in the 1990s, scholars started to pay attention to the fact that "the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods is more distinctly drawn than it should be" (Sechrest & Sidani, 1995, p. 77). Later, scholars strategically converged these two approaches toward a unified end. Brannen (2007) proposed that qualitative and quantitative approaches could be effectively woven into the research stages, such as the research design, fieldwork, interpretation, and contextualization. However, some researchers warned that an eclectic approach might be challenging in some disciplines (Atieno, 2009).

Human Instrument

Since Lincoln and Guba (1985) first introduced the concept that human beings could function as the research instrument in academic endeavors, it has been widely accepted that researchers can play a vital role in qualitative research (Glense & Peshkin, 1992; Patton, 2002). Nevertheless, whether the human instrument's role is positive or negative remains contentious after decades of debate. Scholars such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) believe that the human

instrument is "infinitely adaptable" and can "bring to bear all of the power of its tacit knowledge" (p. 107). However, other researchers are concerned that the researcher's beliefs, values, and individual experiences would potentially limit and constrain the research process when there is a lack of preparation and reflexivity (Denzin, 1989; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003).

The idea of the human instrument has recently been widely discussed. For example, Sofaer (2002) used the term *instrumentation* to refer to the training and practice to write the interview questions and conduct the interviews. Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003) analogized "the researcher as an instrument" to "the Achilles heel" as they argued that "the researcher's mental and other discomforts could pose a threat to the truth value of data obtained and information obtained from data analyses" (p. 419). In 2013, Peredaryenko and Krauss proposed the idea of *calibrating the human instrument*. They found that novice qualitative researchers experience two distinctive ways of being a human instrument: as a researcher-centered instrument and as an informant-centered instrument (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013).

My study was built on the belief that the human instrument (a) plays a vital role in qualitative research; (b) is irreplaceable in knowledge generation, and (c) needs constant practice and training in preparation for the research process. Being a capable human instrument requires various forms of training and practice. For example, Sofaer (2002) noted that "A novice interviewer needs training, which can best be provided by having him or her accompany an experienced interviewer in the field, or listen carefully, probably multiple times, to tapes of effectively conducted interviews" (p. 333). My training and practice as a qualitative researcher have included taking advanced qualitative research courses, working with other qualitative researchers on multiple interdisciplinary projects, performing independent fieldwork, and

actively participating in a mediation training program that equips me with communication skills such as perspective-taking, active listening, and facilitating difficult dialogues. The development of these skills has been an ongoing process calling for continuous learning and reflexivity. The dissertation project has been another venue to develop my qualitative research skills.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach for my dissertation study was three-fold. First, I made a decision regarding methodological congruence. Methodological congruence "refers to the fact that projects entail congruent ways of thinking" (Atieno, 2009, p. 15). When Julie Corbin (2009) recalled her initial interaction with qualitative research while in graduate school, she said:

> Looking back, I believe that qualitative research resonated with me then and continues to do so because it touches at the heart of what nursing is all about: reaching out to people, listening to what they have to say, and then using that knowledge to make a difference in their lives. (p. 36)

I share the same feelings about doing qualitative research in the HRD field. My passion for pursuing this dissertation project can be traced back to my second year of the Ph.D. program when I started to look at women's career interruptions in the global context and completed an integrative literature review of women's career interruptions (Bian & Wang, 2019). I then began to work on several qualitative projects that explored career interruptions among different populations. While preparing for these projects, I became interested in understanding individuals' experiences with career interruptions and their perceptions about an interrupted career. As an HRD professional, I feel obligated to make positive changes in policymaking since the number of individuals experiencing career breaks continues to surge. More importantly, I

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want to help those who have struggled to return to work after a break, have felt lost in their career track, or have been stigmatized by having an interrupted career.

The second reason for choosing a qualitative approach is that it is consistent with my research purpose and questions. My dissertation aimed to understand Chinese women's career interruption experiences and their perceptions about their experiences. Therefore, qualitative research methodology is appropriate as it "is good at simplifying and managing data without destroying complexity and context," and it "is highly appropriate for questions where preemptive reduction of the data will prevent discovery" (Atieno, 2009, p. 16). In sum, qualitative research has helped me generate a better understanding of my topic.

Finally, my methodological choice was also driven by practical and ethical considerations. From a practical perspective, the qualitative approach is aligned with my way of thinking and academic pursuits. From an ethical perspective, taking a qualitative approach is consistent with my inherent values and beliefs that meanings are socially constructed, and researchers are obligated to explore individuals' constructed realities.

Research Design: Grounded Theory

Grounded theory, as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is "an initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research" (p.3). Below, I discuss the current status of grounded theory research in the human resource development field. More importantly, I explain the specific approach I chose to follow in my dissertation project.

Grounded Theory in the Human Resource Development Field

In the HRD field, qualitative research has developed tremendously in the past decades. As indicated in Table 2, Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ), a flagship journal of

the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD), published 30 qualitative and 39 quantitative studies from 2015 to 2020. This trend reflects the field's acceptance of different methodological approaches; however, it also indicates its preference for quantitative studies.

Table 2

HRDQ Publications From the First Issue of 2015 to the First Issue of 2020[26(1)-31(1)] (Editorials and Forums excluded)

Year	Vol and Issue	Quan Study	Quali Study	Mixed Study	Methods Paper	Conceptual Paper	Literature Review	Media Review
Spring 2020	31(1)	4	1	0	0	0	1	0
Winter 2019	30(4)	3	2	1	0	0	0	0
Fall 2019	30(3)	5	0	0	0	0	1	0
Summer 2019	30(2)	2	2	0	1	0	1	0
Spring 2019	30(1)	2	1	0	1	0	1	0
Winer 2018	29(4)	0	4	0	0	0	0	0
Fall 2018	29(3)	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Summer 2018	29(2)	3	0	0	0	1	0	0
Spring 2018	29(1)	2	1	0	0	1	0	0
Winter 2017	28(4)	0	3	0	1	0	0	0
Fall 2017	28(3)	0	1	2	1	0	0	0
Summer 2017	28(2)	1	2	1	0	0	0	0
Spring 2017	28(1)	2	0	1	0	1	0	0
Winter 2016	27(4)	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Fall 2016	27(3)	1	0	2	0	1	0	0
Summer 2016	27(2)	0	4	0	0	0	0	1
Spring 2016	27(1)	1	2	0	0	0	1	2

Table 2 Continued

Year	Vol and Issue	Quan Study	Quali Study	Mixed Study	Methods Paper	Conceptual Paper	Literature Review	Media Review
Winter 2015	26(4)	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fall 2015	26(3)	1	3	0	0	0	0	0
Summer 2015	26(2)	1	3	0	0	0	0	0
Spring 2015	26(1)	2	0	1	0	1	0	0
Total		39	30	9	4	5	5	3

Table 3 summarizes the types of qualitative studies published in HRDQ from 2015 to 2020. The table indicates that the most frequently adopted qualitative methodologies are the basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2002) and case study. The basic qualitative approach, as defined by Merriam (2002), is "interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive" (p. 6). Although basic qualitative research shares the phenomenological notions of experience with phenomenology studies, it focuses more on the general experiences and meanings. In contrast, phenomenology "focuses on the essence or structure of an experience" (p. 7). Among the 30 qualitative studies published in HRDQ, seven articles (#1, #9, #10, #12, #13, #16, and #22) adopted the basic qualitative research approach, and eight articles (#3, #14, #20, #21, #23, #24, #27, and #28) adopted the case study approach. However, other types of qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology and grounded theory have received insufficient scholarly attention by and large.

Since this dissertation study took a grounded theory approach, articles that either adopted grounded theory as the overarching methodology or borrowed grounded theory coding strategies

are in bold in Table 3. In general, grounded theory as a methodology has been under-utilized in

HRD research, as evidenced by the fact that only three publications (articles #5, #26, and #30)

used grounded theory. Seven articles referred to grounded theory, as indicated by the author(s).

Among them, articles #5, #26, and #30 specified that they adopted grounded theory methodology

and articles #4, #6, and #29 only referred to the coding strategies of grounded theory. Article #15

seemed to improperly cite Corbin and Strauss (2014) as those two are not phenomenological

methodologists.

Table 3

Qualitative Methodology Adopted in Articles Published in HRDQ (2015-2020)

#	Article	Volume and Issue	Qualitative Methodology as Indicated by the Author(s)
1	Deer, Zarestky, & Baumgartner (2019)	31(1)	basic qualitative research
2	Hirudayaraj & Clay (2019)	30(4)	qualitative data of a larger multi-methods study
3	Ahn & Hong (2019)	30(4)	case study
4	**Hay & Bleukinsopp (2018)**	**30(2)**	**qualitative study, data analysis informed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) grounded theory approach**
5	**Lundgren, Poell, & Kroon (2019)**	**30(2)**	**grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)**
6	**Frie, Potting, Sjœr, Van de Heijden, & Korzllius (2018)**	**30(1)**	**qualitative interview study, coding informed by Charmaz (2014)**
7	Perkins (2018)	29(4)	qualitative, inductive approach (Cresswell, 2007; Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010)
8	Davis & Van der Heijden (2018)	29(4)	cross-sectional qualitative case studies
9	Hubner & Baum (2018)	29(4)	qualitative approach
10	Hohnson, Blackman, & Buick (2018)	29(4)	a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013; Crossan, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Merriam, 2009)
11	Kirchner (2017)	29(1)	phenomenological study
12	Fletcher (2017)	28(4)	qualitative
13	Govaerts, Kyndt, Vreye, & Dochy (2017)	28(4)	qualitative
14	Algaraja, Egan, & Woodman	28(4)	qualitative multi-case study approach

Table 3 Continued

#	Article	Volume and Issue	Qualitative Methodology as Indicated by the Author(s)
15	**Deptula & Williams (2017)**	**28(3)**	**phenomenological approach**
16	Israel, Bettergarcia, Delucio, Avellar, Harkness, & Goodman (2017)	28(2)	qualitative
17	Kirrane, Breen, & O'Connor (2017)	28(2)	phenomenological approach
18	Cho, Park, Ju, Han, Moon, Park, Ju, & Park (2016)	27(4)	collaborative qualitative study
19	Diehl & Dzubinski (2016)	27(2)	cross-sector analysis of two qualitative studies
20	Tsai (2016)	27(2)	qualitative exploratory case study method
21	Hamlin, Kim, Chai, Kim, & Jeong (2016)	27(2)	qualitative cross-case/cross-nation comparative study
22	Cumberland & Alagaraja (2016)	27(2)	qualitative approach
23	Thory (2016)	27(1)	case study approach
24	Gedro & Hartman (2016)	27(1)	descriptive case study approach
25	Choi & Roulston (2015)	26(3)	qualitative evaluation study
26	**Van Rooij & Merkebu (2015)**	**26(3)**	**modified grounded theory approach, using the analytic procedures of Strauss & Corbin (1998)**
27	Schei & Nerbø (2015)	26(3)	qualitative case study
28	Melo & Beck (2015)	26(2)	qualitative case study
29	**Korte, Brunhaver, & Sheppard (2015)**	**26(2)**	**qualitative, naturalistic methodology, and the interview transcripts were analyzed using procedures prescribed by Miles and Huberman (1994), Strauss and Corbin (1998), as well as a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)**
30	**Mueller & Lovell (2015)**	**26(2)**	**Strauss and Corbin's (1998) approach to grounded theory**

Note. Articles either adopted the grounded theory as the overarching methodology or borrowed its coding strategies were bolded

The published grounded theory studies mentioned above call attention to the

methodological mistakes in grounded theory studies. Wilson and Hutchinson (1996) identified

six types of methodological mistakes in grounded theory research in the nursing field: muddling

qualitative methods, generational erosion, premature closure, overly generic, importing concepts, and methodological transgression (see Table 4).

Table 4

Wilson and Hutchinson (1996): Methodological Mistakes in Grounded Theory Research

Methodological Mistakes	Definition
muddling qualitative methods	Muddling of methods refers to a situation in which the researcher compromises, for example, the integrity of the grounded theory approach and instead generates a typology, long verbatim biographical narratives, or an outcome associated with any number of alternative qualitative approaches.
generational erosion	Generational erosion (Stern, 1993) refers to an undermining of the original canons for grounded theory research.
premature closure	Premature closure refers to the "under-analysis" of textual or narrative data. By definition, grounded theory methodology requires that the researcher move from Level I in vivo or substantive codes (e.g., participants' own words about their experiences) through more abstract Level II categorical codes to Level III conceptual and theoretical codes (e.g., the building blocks of theory). At each level, the theory becomes more refined, yielding a parsimonious integration of abstract concepts that cover behavioral variation. However, in the instance of premature closure, the researcher fails to move beyond the face value of the content in the narrative data. Consequently, the results of such a study never transcend the initial in vivo level of analysis; findings (grounded theory) are based solely on participants' descriptive phrases instead of concepts.
overly generic	Overly generic refers to an analysis that relies on names for so-called "discovered" conceptual processes that are not situation-specific but, rather, are so general that they could apply to any experience or phenomenon.
importing concepts	Importing concepts occur when an aspiring grounded theorist does not suspend preconceptions, disciplinary perspectives, and previous readings when examining the data and fails to provide an original and grounded interpretation.

Table 4 Continued

Methodological Mistakes	Definition
methodological transgression	This transgression refers to frank violations of the grounded theory philosophy and methodology. Rather than operate according to any version of grounded theory (even one that's been tinkered with), canons of a quantitative, positivist method are slightly modified and applied to interview or textual data. This mistake is common when investigators have tacked on an open-ended question or two to a large survey questionnaire and find they need an analytic method.

Note: The definitions are direct quotes from Wilson and Hutchinson (1996, p.122-124)

These methodological mistakes are pitfalls that researchers can easily fall into while conducting grounded theory studies, including in the HRD field. One common mistake is that researchers could mistakenly mix grounded theory methodology with other qualitative approaches in different contexts. For instance, article #15 (Deptula & Williams, 2017) cited Corbin and Strauss (2014) and claimed that they took a phenomenological approach, but Corbin and Strauss were not phenomenology methodologists. Another common mistake is generational erosion. In published grounded theory studies in HRDQ, researchers have sometimes failed to clearly distinguish among different grounded theory approaches. However, in the nursing field, where grounded theory has been widely used in the past decades, researchers have been expected to specify whether they adopted the original Glaser and Strauss (1967) approach, the Glaser interpretation (1978, 1992), or the Strauss and Corbin (1990) re-edition (Gouilding, 2002; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). These methodological mistakes in conducting grounded theory research are serious but preventable problems. Considering this approach has not been widely applied in HRD qualitative research, perhaps some of these mistakes are understandable. However, given the critical need for robust theory-building in HRD along with the value of

grounded theory methodology in theory generation, it is imperative that HRD scholars conduct grounded theory studies in a rigorous manner.

To this end, grounded theory researchers must be aware of the differences among grounded theory methodologies and align their studies accordingly. In this study, I consistently followed the constructivist grounded theory approach proposed by Charmaz (2014).

Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach

As Charmaz noted, her constructivist grounded theory is rooted in pragmatism and the Chicago heritage of symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014). The pragmatist tradition can be found in Glaser's classic grounded theory. According to Age (2011), "usefulness and understanding are especially applicable to Glaserian grounded theory" (p. 1608). In contrast, symbolic interactionism "derives from the pragmatist tradition" and believes that "social life is interactive and emergent" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 263). In her constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz (2014) bridged pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, stating that "we are part of the world we study, the data we collect, and the analyses we produce" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17). In addition, the constructivist grounded theory approach "has epistemological roots in sociological social constructionism" (Charmaz, 2008b, p. 409). Social constructivism dates back to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) classic piece on socially constructed reality, which underscored both reality and knowledge. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), "the reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which this occurs" (p.13). Therefore, social constructionists believe that lived experiences construct meanings. In other words, "we create our social and organizational realities with others in our everyday interactions and conversations" (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 95).

In the last two decades, Charmaz (2000, 2002, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2014) further developed and changed her approach. Due to the substantial differences in her approaches, I specifically chose Charmaz's (2014) more recent approach as the guiding methodology because the 2014 edition provided sufficient details and practical guidelines regarding what grounded theorists should do through the research process. For example, the 2014 edition devoted one more chapter to interviewing than the 2006 edition. In my intensive interviews, I often referred to Charmaz's (2014) detailed explanations of interviewing in grounded theory studies. The 2014 edition also included published examples of scholars from various disciplines using grounded theory. Thus, I learned from the examples that were most relevant to my field of study. For example, Charmaz's 2014 edition included Scheibelhofer's (2008) study of Austrians that had moved to New York City. Scheibelhofer found that some of her participants did not think of themselves as immigrants. Therefore, she modified her interviewing strategy and asked more open-ended questions about the participants' general life experiences. Informed by Scheibelhofer's (2008) reflection, I realized that I had assumed that career interruptions were destructive due to my own negative career interruption experiences. Therefore, I carefully drafted open-ended and neutral questions, asking the participants to reflect on their general feelings during career interruption periods.

Paradigm, Stances, and Positionality

Grounded theory methodology helps researchers achieve theoretical innovation through the data that is collected. However, researchers must be reflective as part of this process. Below, I discuss my paradigm, stances, and positionality that helped me see the data collected for this study in fresh ways.

Paradigm

Kuhn (1962) first proposed the concept of paradigm in his famous book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Consistent with my social constructionism orientation, my dissertation study is informed by the symbolic interactionism paradigm. In the seminal work *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Blumer (1969) depicted symbolic interactionism as a way to study human group life based on three premises: (a) "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them"; (b) "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows"; and (c) "these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 2). Informed by these premises, Charmaz (2014) bridged symbolic interactionism and grounded theory research, stating that "symbolic interactionism inspires theoretically-driven research and leads to fresh theoretical implications. Grounded theory methods offer the analytic tools for doing just that" (p. 262).

Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) emphasized that grounded theory research requires transparency throughout the research process. My adoption of the social constructionism paradigm led to my examination of socially constructed meanings of career interruptions. I believe it is impossible to rule out my pre-existing values and perspectives, but it is also challenging to alter or modify these values. Therefore, it was imperative for me to be aware of my own values and assumptions to avoid imposing them on the participants or collected data.

Insider/Outsider Stances

The insider/outsider stance is essential in qualitative research (Chavez, 2008). Constructivism grounded theory perceives the research process as the co-construction between

the researcher and the participants. Therefore, it is "especially appropriate to the conduct of insider research" (Breen, 2007). However, it is very difficult to describe "what configuration or degree of social experience warrants the designation of insider" (Chavez, 2008, p. 475).

Researchers need to be mindful of the hidden risks of taking either an insider or outsider position. The disadvantage of taking an outsider's perspective is the possibility of imposing the researcher's interpretation of the narratives and life experiences of the participants. In contrast, when approaching the researched topic as an insider, we need to be mindful that the closeness between a researcher and the participants can sometimes deteriorate the research process (Chavez, 2008).

In her constructivist grounded theory research about grief following a fatal crash, Breen (2007) defined herself as neither an insider nor an outsider. In contrast, I perceive myself as both an insider and an outsider in my dissertation project. While interviewing participants from China, I positioned myself as an insider because I am Chinese and was born and raised in China. Nevertheless, there are many subgroups in China spread across a vast territory. People in the southern part differ from those from the north in terms of dialects and cultural norms. As a Southerner, I was perceived as an outsider when interacting with a participant from the north. Another example was my interaction with working mothers. As a student, I was perceived as an outsider of the working class. However, when I interviewed working mothers, they sometimes treated me as an insider given our shared life experiences. Due to the complexities of my competing roles in various contexts and scenarios, it was best for me to "constantly wrestle with issues of identity, authority, and power" (Hill, 2006, p. 947) through both reflexivity and reflections.

Positionality

There are multiple layers in a researcher's positionality. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) perceived positionality primarily as social identities such as citizenship, age, race, and gender. They also suggested an interactive relationship between social identity and the research process. In a similar vein, Dean et al. (2018) found that researchers who interviewed the same group of participants propose different guiding theories, research processes, and outcomes due to their disparate social identities. Thus, researchers must be conscious of their own positionality.

I perceive myself as an international student, a mother of two children, and, most important to this study, a career woman with two career breaks. During my first career interruption, I stayed at home as a full-time mother. In 2014, I moved from China to the United States as a dependent of my husband. The dependent status prohibited me from working in the U.S. even though I had earned a master's degree in my home country. As a result, I spent two years being a stay-at-home mother, not voluntarily but forced to do so by the immigration system. This extended period of non-employment harmed my mental and physical health. I had financial and skill depreciation problems, accompanied by severe self-doubt, anxiety, and depression. Two years later, I applied and was admitted to a Ph.D. program, which started my second career interruption for educational purposes. I was once a victim of the career break stigma that perceives people with a broken career as less competent compared with those with a linear and upward career path. Nevertheless, I was also motivated by stories from people with interrupted careers who creatively and courageously carved their own path to success. Some pursued a career in business sectors (e.g., electronics) where a career break was less likely to be judged and career flexibility was highly valued. Some even started their own businesses as

entrepreneurs. These inspiring stories of people struggling to stay in the labor market ignited my passion to explore interrupted career paths.

The Pilot Study

Chenail (2011) proposed that "a usual procedure for testing the quality of an interview protocol and for identifying potential researcher biases is the pilot study in which investigators try out their proposed methods to see if the planned procedures perform as envisioned by the researcher" (p. 255). Following his advice, I conducted a pilot study on my dissertation topic in fall of 2019. In the pilot study, I interviewed six individuals who live in the United States and have experienced career interruptions. The six participants and their data were not included in this dissertation project. Conducting the pilot study benefited me in three ways.

First, it informed me of the importance of limiting the scope of my dissertation design. For my pilot study, I did not set a contextual boundary, and the six participants came from different countries. However, while analyzing the data, I realized that while national policies, labor market situation, ideologies, and culture are invisible, they had fundamental impact on the participants' career perceptions and experiences. Hence, I decided to focus on the Chinese context for my dissertation project.

Second, I constantly revised my interview protocol during and after the pilot study. For example, I added a question regarding mental activities since all the six participants in the pilot study touched on mental health related issues. This experience enabled me to be more flexible when conducting interviews for my dissertation study.

Third, the pilot study heightened my awareness of my own pre-existing assumptions. For example, I assumed that people opting out for educational purposes would perceive it as having

an interrupted career. However, individuals who took educational leaves might think differently. As a result, I explored the participants' perceptions of career interruptions in my dissertation study.

Research Methods

Informed by Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach, my data analysis was interwoven with my data collection because (a) my dissertation project is an emergent-based design, and (b) I utilized theoretical sampling to refine my categories. The research process chart in Figure 4 illustrates how data collection and analysis were intertwined and led to my findings. Below, I introduce my research methods, including the sampling procedure, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and tools to enhance the theoretical sensitivity.
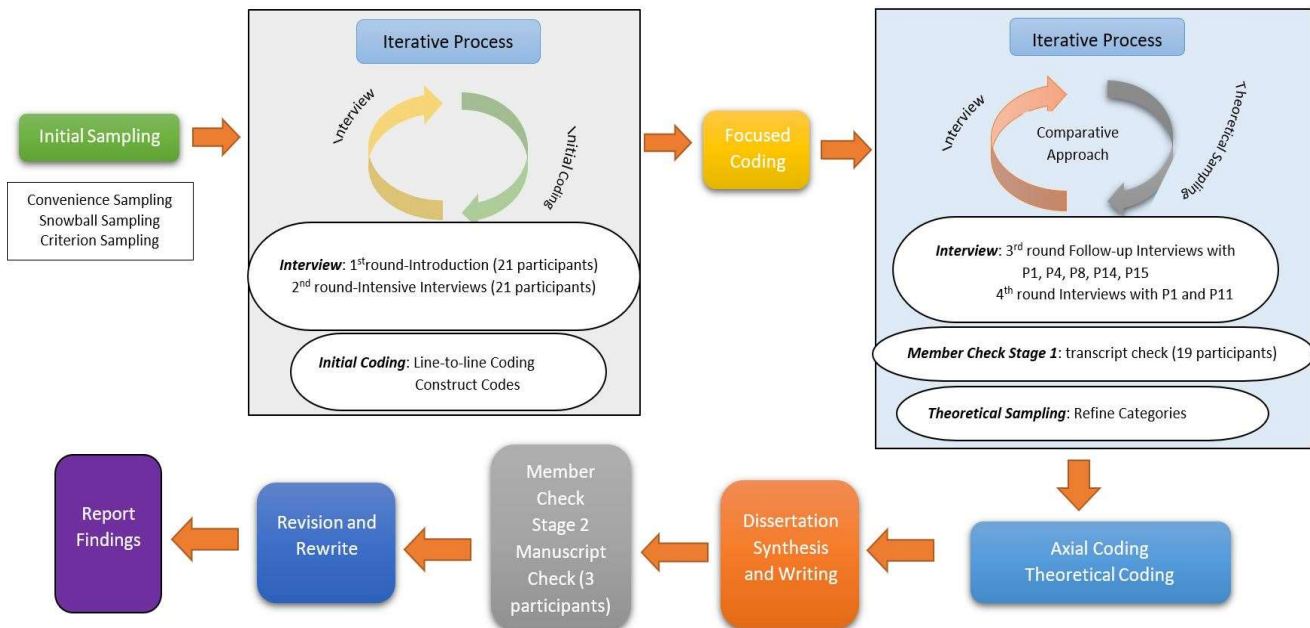
Figure 4. Dissertation Research Process Chart

Sampling Procedure

Grounded theory, as defined by Charmaz (2008b), "begins with inductive strategies for collecting and analyzing qualitative data for the purpose of developing middle-range theories" (p. 397). Building on symbolic interactionism, grounded theory sampling looks for pertinent concepts and the evolution and changes in the concepts over time (Morse, 2010). Guided by Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach, I discuss my sampling procedure below.

Sampling in Grounded Theory

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the overarching criterion of sampling in grounded theory is the *representativeness of concepts* indicating that in the sampling procedure, researchers are "looking for events and incidents that are indicative of phenomena and not counting individuals or sites per se" (p. 190). By identifying these events and incidents, researchers can specify the conditions under which the researched events or phenomena can occur. In the present study, I looked for events and incidents that were indicative of women's career interruption and reentry experiences.

The advantage of conducting qualitative research, as suggested by Charmaz (2014), is that "we can add new pieces to the research puzzle or conjure entire new puzzles—while we gather data—and that can even occur late in the analysis" (p.25). Building on this premise, Charmaz (2014) proposed two sampling strategies for grounded theory research: initial and theoretical sampling. She further explained, "for initial sampling, you establish sampling criteria for people, cases, situations, and/or settings before you enter the field" (p. 197). Theoretical sampling is a crucial strategy compared to initial sampling. Charmaz (2014) defined theoretical

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sampling as "seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your

emerging theory" (p. 192). In the present study, I utilized Charmaz's theoretical sampling

approach to "bring explicit systematic checks and refinements" (Charmaz, 2014, p.192) into my

analysis.

The sampling process stops when the data reaches saturation, which means that "not two

participants ever report the same story with the same description of whatever happened.

However, researchers do not look at the sameness or replication of instances, but of the

characteristics of instances" (Morse, 2010, p. 242). Thus, data saturation also signals the

appropriate sample size for grounded theory studies.

Initial Sampling

At the initial sampling stage, I utilized a combination of convenience sampling, snowball

sampling, and criterion sampling. I contacted individuals who had experienced a career break

and asked them to refer others who had similar experiences. I contacted my potential participants

via email and WeChat (a widely used social media application in China) and asked about their

willingness to participate in my study. The following criteria guided my participant selection:

1. Chinese women (18 years and older) living in urban China: The study examined Chinese

   women's career interruption experiences; therefore, the first criterion was Chinese women

   who were 18 years and older. The study limited the geographic scope to urban China as there

   are disparate structural differences between rural and urban female populations in China for

   three reasons. First, China is undergoing rapid urbanization. Individuals living in urban areas

   will soon outnumber those in rural areas. According to the World Bank, in 1978, "less than

   20 percent of China's population lived in cities; now the share is more than half. On the basis

of the country's per capita income, China's urbanization is projected to reach about 70 percent—some 1 billion people—by 2030" (2014, p. 3). Second, since 2003, women's labor force participation in urban China has steadily increased (Wu & Zhou, 2015). However, there is still minimal understanding of women's career decisions, trajectories, and strategies in urban China. Thus, it is imperative to add this new knowledge to the literature. Third, urban China presents a dynamic picture. Female migration workers have increasingly left their rural homes behind and have migrated to cities for better pay and more job opportunities (Chen, Shao, Murtaza, & Zhao, 2014; Song & Dong, 2018). This highly complex demographic landscape allows for the collection of information-rich data (Patton, 2002).

2. Experienced one or more career interruptions in their career development trajectories: For this study, I adopted Schneer and Reitman's (1997) definition of career interruptions in which career interruptions are "defined as a period of time without employment" and "distinguished from a leave from a job to which one expects to return" (p. 411-412). The participants must have taken a career break for more than one year. For those who experienced multiple career interruptions, at least one of them should have exceeded one year. This criterion was developed based on two considerations: (1) to generate information-rich data (Patton, 2002), the participants must have experienced a relatively long break time and have adequate career interruption experiences; and (2) women who take career breaks longer than one year are more likely to be perceived as having career interruptions because they do not fall into the normal range of career break length stipulated by the maternity policy. Based on a recent review of the maternity leave policy in China (Liu, Yu, &Wang, 2020), the length of maternity leave in China has increased significantly, from the initial 56 days to 98 days and now to as long as 158 days (e.g., Fujian Province). Recently, cities such

as Chongqing and Shijiazhuang extended women's maternal leave to 365 days since it is common for women to interrupt their careers for at least *one year* to take care of children. Although this study is not solely focused on career interruptions for childcare purposes, existing research has drawn a line between breaks of more than one year and less than one year.

3. Reentered the workplace after the career interruption(s): The motivation of this study was to learn from women in urban China about their experience with a career interruption and, more importantly, the strategies they used to navigate the career interruption and return to work. Therefore, participants must have successfully reentered the workplace to provide insights about their evidence-based strategies. Further, individuals' return experiences also help identify the appropriate interventions at different levels. Returning to the workplace is not the same as returning to the same position or organization before the career path was interrupted. A true career break means finding and securing a new job after a career interruption.

For this study, I did not set a limitation for the reasons for taking a career break. For example, some women may have opted out for family reasons, and others did so for individual development considerations. Setting the boundary for the causes of career interruptions may impede the generation of information-rich data and send a misleading message that certain career breaks warrant more in-depth analysis than others.

In the initial sampling stage, I first recruited 18 participants who are different from those participated in my pilot study and conducted the initial coding of the data collected from these participants. Charmaz (2014) emphasized that "initial grounded theory coding can prompt you to see areas in which you lack needed data" (p. 118). The possibility of identifying gaps in the data collected at the earliest stage is perceived as one of the advantages of doing a constructivist

grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2014). After initial coding, I found that one of the subcategories, women reentering in the WeChat business (i.e., a business type whose development hinges on the most popular mobile social media application WeChat), was an emerging phenomenon that warrants further exploration. As the most popular mobile social media application in China, WeChat has approximately 400 million users in China (Champion, 2020). It was initially a communication tool that enabled instant messages launched by Tencent. As its payment function was introduced and widely accepted in China (Tang, Chau, Hong, Ip, & Yan, 2021), WeChat gradually developed the so-called WeChat business (Peng, 2017; Xiao, Tong, Cui, Sheng, Wei, & Luo, 2022). More than 20 million Chinese people engaged in the WeChat business, and among them, 70.75 percent were women (Sohu, 2017). Given that my study focused on women in China, it is important to look at the interactive relationship between the WeChat business and their career development. In May 2021, I was invited by a Chinese WeChat business organization to share my research about women's career development, so I took the opportunity to introduce my dissertation project. After the meeting, three women approached me and expressed their willingness to participate. Therefore, I recruited a total of 21 participants. I conducted intensive interviews with each participant and recorded our conversations. In the recruiting process, in addition to the 21 participants, 12 individuals who did not meet my selection criterion contacted me and expressed their willingness to participate. However, they were not included in the present study because some of them had not fully exited their careers, and some had reentered the workplace in a different country.

Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling helps "elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 193). Charmaz (2014) noted that theoretical sampling has been mistaken for

other types of sampling, such as "sampling to reflect population distributions," "sampling to address initial research questions," "sampling to find negative cases," and "sampling until no new data emerge" (p. 197). Compared with these strategies, theoretical sampling focuses on conceptual and theoretical development instead of increased statistical generalizability.

According to Charmaz (2014), theoretical sampling "involves starting with data, constructing tentative ideas about the data, and then examining these ideas through further empirical inquiry" (p. 199). Using the constant comparative method to examine my data, I found two categories emerged through coding and memo-writing: *women working in China* and *women making career choices*. These two categories revealed the complexities of women's opting-in and opting-out decisions. To refine these two categories, I first returned to my data and coded the data again from my new vantage point. For example, P1 resigned from her job and moved to the United States with her husband. In the interview, she emphasized, "People think I quit my job for family reasons. Only I knew that was so not true." As I coded, I realized I needed more information about what P1 meant by "that was so not true." I went back to the data and tried to find answers. I found other quotes in P1's transcript, such as "I made the decision for myself," "people made assumptions about my decisions," and "the relocation was just a trigger. The truth is, deep down in my heart, I didn't enjoy working in that organization anymore." A reexamination of P1's story revealed significant yet overlooked information: misconceptions about women's career decision-making for family reasons. Some people such as coworkers and supervisors, believed that P1 sacrificed her career development due to her husband's relocation. However, P1 made a career choice based on her career prospects and interests. The relocation was a chance event to help her make up her mind. These differing accounts reveal how women's career decisions have been oversimplified in society. The theoretical sampling and data analysis

led me to refine the two categories and the production of a major component in Chapter V: Break down the misconception with truth—we did not opt-out just for kids.

I also went back to my participants and collected more data when needed. For example, as I coded the interviews, I realized that organizations provided minimum support in the women's reentry. This finding was unexpected because I assumed that the organizations had played a significant role in supporting the women's return. To collect more data, I again interviewed P1, P4, P8, P14, and P15 to discuss the role the organizations played in their return. According to the participants, organizations didn't provide any mentorship or training to support their return. When I asked about their expectations, one participant said, "I don't think they (i.e., the organizations) would respond to our requests. If they really want to help, start by hiring people like us" (P1). The theoretical sampling and data analysis led to the production of another major component in Chapter V: Be invisible in the crowd—we are forgotten as skilled workers.

Ethical Considerations

First, I submitted an application to Texas A&M University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was approved for my dissertation project (Appendix A). Given that my study is conducted in a different cultural context, IRB requested an Authorization Letter (Appendix B) and a Cultural Evaluation Letter (Appendix C). A Chinese HRD scholar wrote the Authorization Letter to evaluate this project from the study design perspective. The Cultural Evaluation Letter was prepared by a native Chinese living in China to assess the cultural appropriateness of the proposed study. Both letters were reviewed and approved by the IRB. To interview non-English speaking subjects, I completed the Certificate of Translation (Appendix D) as guided by the IRB. Subsequently, I strictly followed the IRB-approved protocol in my research process and took all necessary steps to protect the participants.

Orb et al. (2000) summarized three ethical principles in qualitative research: autonomy ("the right to be informed about the study, the right to freely decide whether to participate in a study, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty"), beneficence ("doing good for others and preventing harm"), and justice ("equal share and fairness") (p. 95). These principles guided my application package, consisting of a consent form, interview questions, and recruitment materials.

Marshal and Rossman (2016) emphasized that qualitative researchers should bring ethics into trustworthiness. Specifically, the overall design and research process should "include discussion of the fit within the setting and the participants' sensitivities" (p. 50). As a qualitative researcher, I respect individuals' interpretations and perceptions of their own life experiences. I am also aware of the significance of the ethical involvement of the researchers in the generation of new knowledge. I stay very close to my dissertation topic due to my own career development journey and professional training. I interrupted my career twice, and during those career breaks, I critically analyzed my career trajectories and developed plans. Additionally, while pursuing a Ph.D. degree in HRD, I focused on building a deep understanding of career development theories and practices. The accumulation of knowledge, experiences, and expertise connected me with my participants and the data. Nevertheless, I was cautious about imposing my own meanings on my participants. To achieve that, I had to practice constant self-scrutiny and self-consciousness of my values and stances, as well as examine the relationship between my perspective and the data (Bourke, 2014; Chiseri-Stater, 1996; Pillow, 2003).

Data Collection

I collected data from intensive one-on-one interviews. Intensive interviewing provides in-depth exploration of a given topic or experience (Charmaz, 2014). According to Charmaz (2014),

intensive interviewing has three characteristics. First, it is an in-depth interpretive inquiry of participants' experiences and perceptions. Second, it embraces open-ended, non-judgmental questions. Third, the researcher is expected to request clarifying details. Following these principles, I interviewed the participants one-on-one. Due to the social distancing restrictions under the COVID-19 pandemic, I could not travel to China as planned. Therefore, I conducted all the interviews online through Zoom, Skype, or WeChat, as preferred by the participants.

Participants were interviewed three to four times, depending on their willingness and availability. The first round of interviews was for rapport-building and information exchange. During this first meeting, I informed the participants of the purpose of my study and shared their commitment and rights as participants. I also collected demographic information (i.e., age range, marital status, length of the marriage, number of children, children's ages, highest education, and current location) of the participants and provided an opportunity to ask any relevant questions. The second round of interviews was in-depth intensive interviews, which included 21 participants. The third round of interviews was a quick follow-up for further probing and clarification with P1, P4, P8, P14, and P15. In the fourth round, P1 and P11 were interviewed because they received new job offers after the one-on-one interviews. I initiated this fourth round of interviews with them because the new career opportunities modified their career paths and added fresh perspectives.

I followed the steps and principles below to conduct the intensive interviews:

(a) Making preliminary arrangements: I introduced myself (Appendix E) and contacted each potential participant through messaging, WeChat messages, or emails to check their eligibility for my study. For those who met the inclusion criteria, I set up an appointment for a

virtual interview if they were willing to participate. I also submitted an English version of the Recruitment Letter (Appendix F) for the IRB to review.

(b) Setting up the environment: Each interview started with the consent (Appendix G) process, in which I explained to the participants their rights and responsibilities and addressed any questions or concerns they may have. The English version of the Consent Form (Appendix H) I utilized was approved by the IRB and is attached to this dissertation.

(c) Conducting the interviews. After the initial interviews to set up the arrangements, the second round of intensive interviews took approximately 60-120 minutes, whereas the third and fourth round of interviews took nearly 25-30 minutes. Following Charmaz's (2014) advice, each interview question (Appendix I) was open-ended and non-judgmental. The English version of the interview questions (Appendix J) were reviewed and approved by the IRB. I also recorded the interviews with participants' permission. The interviews were recorded using a Sony recorder and a smartphone app, *Voice Recorder*. Charmaz (2014) mentioned that she took notes for her dissertation interviews, following Glaser's (1978) guidance. However, she later found that notes could not sufficiently preserve the situational details and interview flow. Therefore, my dissertation process adopted transcripts instead of notes. After each interview, I immediately transcribed the recording and saved the full transcript as a Word document. In my previous research, I often relied on resources such as Otter.ai or Zoom to do audio transcription. However, my interviews of the dissertation project were conducted in Chinese. To ensure accuracy, I personally transcribed the interviews by listening to and typing the conversations. One interviewee refused to be recorded, so I took field notes, and she also sent me a reflexive journal as a reference. In the interview process, I followed Charmaz's (2014) suggestion that "let your research participant set the tone and pace and then mirror what seems comfortable to him or her"

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(p. 63). For example, one participant briefly mentioned her struggles with bipolar depression. To show respect and help her relax, I did not ask any probing questions. Instead, I let the participant choose what she felt was comfortable and appropriate to share with me. Another example was a participant that had panic attack and anxiety issues. In China, mental illnesses have long been stigmatized. The participant was very careful with her privacy, so she proposed an audio chat instead of a video meeting. I respected her decision and interviewed her through audio chat. By creating a safer environment, she was able to share with me some innermost thoughts and feelings that she had never shared with anyone else.

(d) Protecting the interview data. To ensure confidentiality, I used codes (e.g., P1, P2, P3) to represent the interviewed participants. All the interview recordings were stored in a safe place to which only I have access. These procedures were approved by the IRB to protect participants' confidentiality. While analyzing my data, I transported the interviews into Nvivo software. My account was password-protected, and I am the only account owner.

(e) Conducting member checking. After the intensive interviews, I conducted member checking with the participants. The first member checking was asking participants to check their transcripts. Nineteen participants were able to help review their transcripts. Later, I revised the transcripts based on their feedback. For example, after reviewing her transcript, P11 noted that although her childcare responsibilities heavily influenced her career choices, she wanted to emphasize that her daughter brought her inner strength to face the challenge. As I finished the first draft of my dissertation, I invited three participants for a second round of member checking, called manuscript checking. Only three participants could help with the manuscript check because I wrote my dissertation in English; therefore, it required a certain level of English proficiency to review my work. The three participants provided constructive feedback. For

instance, one participant mentioned that in China, working within and outside of the system (i.e., government and state-owned enterprises) was unique to the Chinese context. She suggested I dig deeper into women's struggles in choosing between working within and outside of the system. Her suggestion was well taken, and my analysis of women's struggles led to a major concept in Chapter V: The fortress besieged phenomenon—struggle to decide between two choices.

Data Analysis

While analyzing the data, I utilized Nvivo software to help me store, organize, sort, and visualize my collected data, findings, and the coding process. Coding is the pivotal link between data collection and theory generation in grounded theory research. Charmaz (2014) outlined two basic phrases of grounded theory coding: initial coding and focused coding. According to Charmaz, the initial coding involves naming each word, line, or segment of data; and focused coding involves using the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data. She also admitted that the axial coding and theoretical coding, which were proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Glaser (1978), are constructive coding strategies that can be utilized in the constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2014). Axial coding "specifies the properties and dimensions of a category" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 147). Theoretical coding, which is more sophisticated, "helps you tell an analytical story that has coherence" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 150). Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) emphasized that grounded theory analysis calls for going back and forth between data collection and analysis, called an *iterative process*. This iterative process is part of the *constant comparative method* proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

Initial Coding

Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) recommended line-by-line coding as the first step of analyzing data in grounded theory studies. During the initial coding process, I tried my best not to overshadow the data with any pre-existing categories by remaining open-minded and allowing new ideas to emerge. In Nvivo software, I carefully read through each line of the transcripts and made inferences when the meanings were implied.

Focused Coding

My primary task at the focused coding stage was to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize the collected data. After the initial coding of the transcripts, I compared data to data and developed the focused codes. I then used "the most significant and frequent earlier codes to sift through and analyze" the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). There was considerable back and forth, especially for the focused-coding transcripts from P1 to P8. I needed to refine my initial codes and identify the codes that subsumed substantial initial codes. For example, the category *Previous Work Experiences* was first a category that broadly embraced all previous working experiences of the participants. After the focused coding of six participants, I found vast differences among those who had worked in the private sector, a state-owned business, or a foreign business regarding organizational culture, employment policies, and leadership styles in China. Therefore, I refined the category into three subcategories: working for state-owned business, working for private business, and working for foreign business. Another example is when coding the participants' life experiences during the career interruption period, I listed a subcategory *Travel*. Later, I found other hobbies such as playing piano and visiting museums, so I merged these experiences under the subcategory *Entertaining Themselves* and removed the subcategory *Travel*. In addition, it was obvious that the transcripts were analyzed more

exhaustively as the coding process continued because more categories and subcategories

emerged. As indicated in Table 5, the number of references under each category grew noticeably

from P1 to P4. To address this issue and ensure that the earlier transcripts were equally and

thoroughly analyzed, I utilized the constant comparative method, went back to previous

transcripts, and repeated the coding process to see if any adjustments were needed.

Table 5

Example of Codes and References Changes in Number After Repeated Focused Coding

Participant	Number of Codes Before Repeated Focused Coding (RFC)	Number of Codes After RFC	Number of References Before RFC	Number of References After RFC
P1	23	25	26	30
P2	18	19	31	34
P3	18	22	29	40
P4	14	17	21	26
P5	23	23	40	40
P6	26	26	48	48

In the end, initial codes collapsed into nine categories. Below is a list of the categories

that emerged and a summary of each category (see Table 6).

Table 6

Categories and the Summary

	Category name	Description of category
1	Women making career choices	Participants reported factors that had influenced their career decisions of taking a career interruption. The factors included internal (e.g., career value) and external (e.g., pregnancy) elements.
2	Women working in China	Participants shared their prior work experiences. Most participants had worked in state-owned or private businesses. Some worked in foreign businesses. Three participants started their own businesses at some point in their career lives.
3	Society creating barriers for women's return	Most participants mentioned that China's societal and cultural contexts, especially the societal expectations of women, had negatively influenced their career interruption and return experiences.

Table 6 Continued

	Category name	Description of category
4	Organizations not paying enough attention to returners	In general, organizations did not pay enough attention to the returners in terms of providing resources, training, and guidance.
5	Women perceiving career interruptions	Participants shared their definitions of career interruptions. They also compared their perceptions and society's perceptions about career interruptions. In general, Chinese society perceives career interruptions as detrimental and damaging. In contrast, most participants reported that their career interruption experiences were constructive in certain aspects.
6	Women availing themselves of career interruptions	Participants reported their activities in the career interruption period. They utilized this period to pursue higher education or vocational training, take care of their family, practice self-care, entertain themselves, and freelance.
7	Women returning to work	Most participants reported that despite all the challenges, their return experience was overall positive and rewarding.
8	Women finding opportunities in unplanned events	Participants reported that instead of a definite career plan, they would prefer finding opportunities in unplanned events. Many shared a general career vision, such as the occupation they chose, the career goal they set for themselves, and the barriers and struggles they experienced.
9	Women offering advice to peers and organizations	Participants offered advice for individuals and organizations based on their career interruption and return experiences.

Axial Coding

Axial coding helps define a category. According to Charmaz (2014), initial coding fractures data into independent codes, while axial coding develops subcategories of a category and identifies the logical links among them. Axial coding was necessary because it helped me refine a category, and presenting the subcategories of a category helped me illustrate the cognitive process behind the coding activities.

The axial coding adopted by Charmaz (2014) is different from the organizing scheme (i.e., conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences) developed by Strauss and Corbin

(1998). Charmaz (2014) recommended an emergent approach to reveal the categories, subcategories, and links. Career interruption is a complicated period in which many issues emerge under various circumstances. In this exploratory study, I intended to exhaustively present the synthesized information to show a comprehensive picture for future studies. Thus, I followed Charmaz's axial coding to identify the subcategories of a main category as this approach aligns best with a constructivist approach. Charmaz (2014) warned that a common pitfall of doing grounded theory studies is "coding for themes rather than analyzing actions" (p. 246), leading to descriptive findings rather than theory generation. Thus, during axial coding, I viewed career interruption as a fluid process instead of a career phenomenon and my synthesized categories reflected the process mindset. Below is a list of categories, corresponding subcategories, and representative codes.

Table 7

Categories, Subcategories, and Representative Codes

Category Name	Subcategories		Representative quotes (quotes were translated through a combination of the back translation method and communicative translation approach)
Women working in China	• Working for state-owned enterprises • Working for private businesses • Working for foreign businesses		• While working within the system (i.e., government and state-owned enterprises), I did repetitive work. (P10) • I always worked extra hours. I had the opportunity to be promoted; however, I understood it was a trade-off. I had a burnout at work. (P1) • The organizational culture in the consulting firm was quite westernized. My coworkers respected personal boundaries. (P3)
Women making career choices	Internal	• Finding career interests • Sharing career values with coworkers • Lacking a required credential • Suffering physically • Suffering mentally	• Being a teacher has always been my dream. Teaching is like putting a seed of knowledge in the ground and letting go, knowing that a beautiful plant will come. (P16) • I chose to work with individuals who share the same career values with me. We work for children with special needs. I find people working in this field patient and devoted. (P17) • I am not good at writing administrative reports. (P2) • My legs were injured. I spent a lot of time on physical therapy sessions. (P13) • I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression. I cannot live or work by myself because of unexpected panic attacks. (P10)

Table 7 Continued

Category Name	Subcategories	Representative quotes (quotes were translated through a combination of the back translation method and communicative translation approach)
	External • Experiencing job loss	• My company decided to permanently close this branch store. I lost my job. (P6)
	• Organizational culture affecting employees' decisions	• I saw little cooperation and teamwork. People were reluctant to speak out or accept responsibility. (P5)
	• Relocating	• I moved from Hangzhou to Shanghai. That changed everything. (P9)
	• Leadership style affecting team members	• My supervisor was not married. However, she was very understanding while working with married people and individuals with kids, like me. (P14)
	• Evaluating the career prospects	• The news industry went downhill. I don't see a future for myself. (P9)
	• Labor market undergoing changes	• I felt pessimistic about the job market. The economy was not growing as fast as before. I thought the best choice was to get an iron bowl (i.e., work in the government or state-owned enterprises). (P10)
	• Comparing salary and benefits	• I link salary with my self-worth. The salary was so low that I decided to quit. (P18)
	• Family influencing career decisions	• Child-caring is very demanding work. I spent three hours breastfeeding every day. It was impossible for me to work. (P1)
	Reflecting on career decision-making	• The right or wrong (answer) solely depends on what I got from my resignation and the career interruption period. If I finally made a successful career shift, I would say it was a smart decision. (P9)

Table 7 Continued

Category Name	Subcategories	Representative quotes (quotes were translated through a combination of the back translation method and communicative translation approach)
Women availing themselves of career interruptions	• Pursuing educational and vocational training • Performing family responsibilities • Evaluating financial status • Entertaining themselves • Getting mental health care • Getting physical health care • Working (e.g., freelance)	• I went to Britain for a master's degree in communication. It took me two to three years. (P4) • My daughter was diagnosed with autism. I quit my job so that I could take care of her. It was found that early intervention could have long-term positive effects on kids diagnosed with autism. She needed me. (P17) • In my career break, we had to pay all the bills with my husband's paycheck. We experienced financial stress. (P12) • I traveled to Xi'an in 2016. It was a great experience visiting all the museums. (P6) • I felt isolated and disconnected. (P6) • I put on a lot of weight, so I was trying to lose weight. (P7) • Since I had plenty of time, I went to the Golden Triangle as a volunteer teacher. It was an unforgettable experience. (P7)
Women perceiving career interruptions	• Defining career interruptions • Participants perceiving career interruptions • Society perceiving career interruptions	• If you are experiencing a career interruption, it means you don't have a full-time contract. (P14) • Career interruption is a unique experience. I had the opportunity to pause and replenish my internal energy reserves. I felt it was fun and rewarding. (P15) • Our society assumes that everyone should stay on track and work non-stop. My career break, from that perspective, was futile and ineffectual. (P1)

Table 7 Continued

Category Name	Subcategories	Representative quotes (quotes were translated through a combination of the back translation method and communicative translation approach)
Women returning to work	• Evaluating current job	• To be honest, I don't like my job. But working is still way much better than being a full-time mom. (P2)
	• Receiving intergenerational support	• I know many returning moms. They all have their parents or parents-in-law come to take care of their kids. (P1)
	• Identifying market trends	• The national policies lean towards fresh graduates in the labor market. For me, I don't have access to these resources because I gapped a year. I was no longer counted as a fresh graduate. (P2)
	• Preparing to return	• Expanding your network is very important. The network I established helped me a lot in my job search. (P8)
	• Choosing to return	• I need to re-establish my connection with the outside. Besides, I could have a little self-time. (P11)
Organizations not paying enough attention to the returners	• Some leaders providing support	• Instead of ending the contract with me, my supervisor granted me extended leave. I was grateful for that. (P19)
	• Returners lacking resources	• When I reentered, I didn't have access to training resources. I had to wait for months for the orientation trainings that were specifically facilitated for the fresh graduates. (P20)

Table 7 Continued

Category Name	Subcategories	Representative quotes (quotes were translated through a combination of the back translation method and communicative translation approach)
Society creating barriers for women's return	• Returners experiencing age discrimination • Affirmative action causing negative effects • Comparing cultures (compare between urban and rural, southern and northern areas, China and other countries) • Women experiencing stereotypes, discrimination, and gender segregation	• In the financial field, many positions I applied for prefer candidates that are 30 or younger. (P1) • My advisor said things like girls do not need to work hard. Find yourself something easier to do. His care and support, from my perspective, were counterproductive. (P5) • I had a friend in the United States. She had a career break of two more years. Recently, she returned to work very smoothly. I think other countries might have higher tolerance towards interrupted careers than we do. (P1) • I planned to pursue higher education in another country. My parents were against my plan. They thought as a woman; there was no need to climb the career ladder. (P13)
Women finding opportunities in unplanned events	• Setting objectives • Making occupational choices • Experiencing barriers (external) • Having struggles (internal)	• I plan to build my insurance agent team. I want to recruit professionals who share the same career values as me. (P9) • I was thinking about a career shift to the psychological counseling field. (P7) • My biggest challenge is the funding resources. I need some external financial support. (P11) • I used to believe solid plans help in better execution. But in the past few years, so many things happened. I don't like it when things go out of my control, but it is what it is. I lost confidence in career planning. Now I choose to flow with whatever shows up in my life. (P15)
Women offering advice to peers and organizations	• Women offering advice to peers • Women offering advice to organizations	• It is Okay to interrupt your career. But you need to strategically plan and utilize the interruption period. (P20) • Organizations can have some reentry programs specifically targeting returners. Training is also necessary. (P12)

Theoretical Coding

Theoretical coding aims to conceptualize and identify possible relations between categories developed in the focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). Glaser (1978) proposed the concept of theoretical coding families without explicitly defining it. Charmaz (2006) cautioned that some coding families are absent from Glaser's coding families. Therefore, Charmaz and Thornberg (2014) suggested that theoretical coding should "investigate all kinds of extant theories" to help figure out the "embedded theoretical codes" (p. 162). In line with Charmaz's (2014) statement that theoretical codes "help you tell an analytic story that has coherence" (p. 150), the present study utilized theoretical coding to help specify the relationship between the focused codes. Based on this concept, the present study synthesized the findings of career interruptions and provided an integrative framework. The results of the theoretical coding are presented in Chapter V.

Quality Control

This section discusses quality control based on a transparent disclosure of my research process. First, I discuss theoretical sensitivity and how it is closely tied with quality and evaluation in grounded theory. Second, I describe the strategies I used to enhance my theoretical sensitivity throughout the research process.

Theoretical Sensitivity

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the quality of a grounded theory study lies in its theoretical contributions. Grounded theorists emphasize *theoretical sensitivity* rather than trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Theoretical sensitivity is "a multidimensional concept

that includes the researchers' level of insight into the research area" (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 28).

How is theoretical sensitivity acquired? Glaser (1978) encourages researchers to stay alert of pre-existing hypotheses and biases. Strauss and Corbin (1990) recommended strategies such as the "flip-flop" and questioning to enhance theoretical sensitivity. Charmaz (2014) also recommended developing theoretical sensitivity through theorizing. Specifically, she described theorizing as "looking at studied life from multiple vantage points, make comparisons, follow leads, and build on ideas" (p. 244).

One strategy to enhance theoretical sensitivity, according to Charmaz (2014), is using gerunds in researching and memo-writing to help the researcher focus on actions and processes instead of topics or themes. In the present study, I viewed the participants' career interruption experiences as fluid processes with intriguing actions of opting-in, opting-out, and making career choices. I also followed Charmaz's (2014) recommendation to use gerunds in memo-writing. Another strategy is taking a reflective and critical stance in reviewing the literature. Glaser and Strauss (1967) were concerned that young scholars might force data into pre-existing theories and models if they review the literature before analyzing data. However, other grounded theorists, including Charmaz (2014), recognized that scholars are unlikely to begin research without prior knowledge of the field. In the present study, I followed Charmaz's (2014) recommendation that the literature review should help create a dialog and "prompt you to make explicit and compelling connections between your study and earlier studies" (p. 309). In Chapter II, I reviewed the literature on women's career interruptions in a global context and focused on Chinese women's career development in the past decades. The review helped me identify the gaps and think afresh while conducting my dissertation project.

Strategies for Enhancing Theoretical Sensitivity

Charmaz (2014) highlighted four criteria for evaluating grounded theory: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. In their recent work, Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) provided a quality control checklist for conducting grounded theory or qualitative research in general. The checklist includes items such as methodological self-consciousness, transparency, and ambiguity tolerance. To ensure the rigor of a qualitative study, researchers must engage in constant reflexive thinking and critical reflection. For my dissertation study, I employed four specific strategies to enhance my theoretical sensitivity: memo-writing, peer debriefing, member checking, and taking observation field notes.

Memo-writing. Throughout the study, I kept track of the shifts in strategies, conceptualizations, and theoretical propositions through memo-writing. Memo-writing "is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers," and it helps prompt "you to analyze your data and codes early in the research process" (Charmaz, 2014, p.162). As my study unfolded, details recorded in the research memos influenced the ongoing research process. For example, most of the participants were middle-aged women who were actively multitasking while being interviewed; P4 and P18 were taking care of their kids, and P8 was working on a project. Therefore, my memo recorded several pauses in our interviews due to external distractions. Another example was a participant who had been diagnosed with bipolar depression and anxiety. In China, mental illnesses have long been stigmatized, so the participant was very careful about her privacy, and thus proposed an audio chat instead of a video meeting. When I agreed to use the audio format, I realized that in doing so, I was building trust, and the forthcoming communication was smooth and productive. Memo-writing also helped capture details and incidents related to the study and served as a valuable reference in retrospection.

Charting and drawing were my most frequently used strategies in memo-writing because they allowed me to visualize my thoughts. I provide an example of my conceptualization of a historical review of women's studies in China (see Appendix K).

   Peer Debriefing. I utilized peer debriefing on a regular basis throughout the dissertation planning, investigating, and writing processes. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), peer debriefing increases the credibility of qualitative research by "exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). Spall (1998) also encouraged dissertation students to use peer debriefing for professional development as well as to develop personal support systems over time. In grounded theory studies, peer debriefing "is especially important because of the emic nature of the process" (Barber and Walczak, 2009, p. 5-6). Barber and Walczak (2009) reported their peer debriefing experiences in conducting a grounded theory study about college students forming connections. They relied on peer debriefers to help review coding, check biases, and critique their work. In the present study, the debriefers included a faculty member and three Ph.D. students in the HRD field.

   Spillett (2003) also suggested inviting peer debriefers from diverse backgrounds to provide different perspectives. Therefore, I also invited an outsider: a Ph.D. student in the Educational Psychology field, to help with peer debriefing. She provided insights on the logical flow and structure, identified places that called for further explanation, and reminded me of my pre-existing assumptions as a qualitative HRD researcher. I initiated peer debriefing at two stages: the study design and focused coding. For example, I invited my debriefers to evaluate my interview guide and revised the interview questions based on their suggestions. They also helped me practice interviews so I would be more prepared for my formal interviews. At the focused

coding stage, I reached out to my debriefers when I struggled with coding. For instance, we had discussions about whether doing a WeChat business was considered "being employed." We decided that participants involved in a WeChat business were experiencing career breaks because of a lack of stable income and formal contracts. However, we also noted that a WeChat business offered an onramp for returners. The details are presented in Chapter IV.

Member Checking. Member checking is the technique "whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stake-holding groups from whom the data were originally collected" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). My member checks consisted of two major components: a transcript check and a manuscript check. I sent the transcribed conversations to the participants and asked for their verification. Doing so ensured that I accurately captured the conversation and implied meanings. The manuscript check was conducted when I finished editing the first draft of my dissertation. At the member checking stage, I approached 16 participants. However, only three participants could help with the manuscript check because I wrote my dissertation in English; therefore, it required a certain level of English proficiency to review my work.

Observational Notes. My original plan was to conduct observations by following the participants to their workplaces and taking field notes about their daily tasks, interpersonal relationships, and work habits. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the observations I could perform as a researcher were highly restricted. Nevertheless, I could take observational notes in the interview process based on the close observation of the participants' non-verbal clues, such as facial expressions, pauses, and intonation. I took these observational notes during the interviews, and immediately after the interviews, I transcribed the recordings and added the notes to the transcripts. An example of my observational notes (see Appendix L) is provided.

Summary

This chapter explained my rationale for choosing a constructivist grounded theory approach. Additionally, I described the methods I used for participant recruitment and data collection. I conducted intensive interviews with 21 participants. I also presented in depth the data analysis process and ethical considerations. Lastly, I described the strategies I adopted to enhance the quality of data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

From March to October 2021, I interviewed 21 urban Chinese women who interrupted their careers for more than one year and successfully returned to the workplace. In this chapter, I start with a general description of these participants, including demographic information and detailed career trajectories. I then present the development of nine major categories and corresponding subcategories. To fully describe the participants' experiences, I provide direct quotes and life stories to outline each category and subcategory. This chapter concludes with major findings from the data analysis.

The Participants

Before the intensive interviews, I collected background information from the participants. The information covers two areas: (a) general information (i.e., age range, length of marriage, number of children, children's ages, highest education attained, and which city they currently live in); and (b) career trajectories (i.e., timeframe, location, and responsibilities of each job, when they interrupted their careers, the length of interruption, and their return date). To ensure confidentiality, I used numbers (e.g., P1, P2, P3) to represent the interviewed participants. Below I introduce the participants and their characteristics.

General Information

Table 8 presents the general information of the 21 participants. All of them currently live in urban areas (13 cities) across China. Some live in southern areas (e.g., Nanjing, Shanghai, and Xiamen) and some live in northern cities (e.g., Beijing and Handan). The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 48, with 14 in their early thirties (31-35 years old). Fifteen participants were married. Twelve participants had one or more children. In general, the participants were highly

educated: about half (10) had a master's degree or higher. P10's information was missing because she was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety, and due to privacy concerns, she did not want me to release any of her personal information.

Table 8

Participants' Profile

Participant	Age Range	Marital Status	Length of the Marriage (years)	Number of Children	Children's Ages (years)	Highest Education	Current Location (City)
P1	31-35	Married	6-10	2	3 and 1	Master	Nanjing
P2	31-35	Married	0-5	1	3	Master	Penglai
P3	26-30	Married	0-5	0	N/A	Master	Hefei
P4	46-50	Married	6-10	2	5.5 and 1.5	Master	Beijing
P5	31-35	Married	6-10	0	N/A	Ph.D.	Wuhan
P6	31-35	Single	N/A	0	N/A	Bachelor	Nanjing
P7	31-35	Single	N/A	0	N/A	Master	Xiamen
P8	31-35	Married	6-10	2	6 and 1	Ph.D.	Shanghai
P9	36-40	Married	0-5	0	N/A	Bachelor	Shanghai
P10	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Nanjing
P11	31-35	single	N/A	0	N/A	Bachelor	Nanjing
P12	36-40	Married	11-15	2	3 and 6	Bachelor	Shanghai
P13	31-35	Single	N/A	0	N/A	Master	Chongqing
P14	31-35	Married	0-5	1	2	Master	Shanghai
P15	31-35	Single	N/A	0	N/A	Master	Shanghai
P16	31-35	Married	6-10	1	9	Bachelor	Yantai
P17	41-45	Married	16-20	2	14 and 8	Bachelor	Shanghai
P18	26-30	Married	0-5	1	1.5	Bachelor	Inner Mongolian
P19	31-35	Married	0-5	1	2.5	Technical Degree	Xingtai
P20	31-35	Married	6-10	1	5	Bachelor	Handan
P21	31-35	Married	6-10	2	7 and 5	Bachelor	Suzhou

Career Trajectories

One of the sampling criteria required the participants to have experienced one or more career interruptions. Thus, all the participants had highly complex career paths that consisted of two or more jobs. Table 9 summarizes general information about their jobs and career

interruptions to help understand the participants' stories. As revealed in Table 9, the length of the participants' career interruptions ranged from three months to seven years and seven months. Some participants experienced career interruptions more than once. For those with more than one career interruption, at least one interruption was longer than one year. China is a socialist market economy, where state-owned enterprises, private businesses, and foreign companies coexist. The participants worked in different business sectors, and 12 worked in more than one business sector. For example, P9's first job was in a state-owned publishing house and the second job was in a private real estate company. At the time of the interview, she worked for an insurance-related foreign company. In addition, the participants worked in various occupations including education, finance, foreign trade, real estate, and government. Hence, it is safe to conclude that the participants had rich experiences in diverse working environments and cultures.

Table 9

Participants' Career Trajectory Summary Table

P1						
	First Job	Career Break	Continued Education	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break
Time Frame	09/2013—05/2016	3 months	08/2016—12/2012	2 years and 2 months 12/2018—interview (02/2012)	04/2021 to date (10/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Executive Secretary		Master's Degree in Finance		Financial Investment Manager	
Organization	Private Business				Private Business	
City	Suzhou				Nanjing	
Job Responsibilities	Write business briefs Prepare reports				Evaluate post-investments	
P2						
	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Continued Education	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	07/2013—07/2014	1 year and 3 months	10/2015—06/2018	06/2018—interview (03/2021)	N/A	N/A

Job Title	Middle School Geography Teacher		Admin Secretary	Ph.D. student in Chinese Literature	
Organization	Middle School		Local Government		
City	Baoshan		Tengzhou		
Job Responsibilities	Teach six classes per week Organize field trips Attend teaching skills training sessions		Set up meetings and take minutes Manage databases		

P3

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	10/2017—04/2018	3 months	07/2018—11/2019	1 year 4 months	04/2021—interview (05/2021)	
Job Title	Research Assistant		Consultant		IELTS Teacher (Part Time)	
Organization	Private Business (Market Investigation)		Accounting Firm		Private Business	
City	Shanghai		Shanghai		Hefei	
Job Responsibilities	Conduct market investigations Write reports		Prepare and examine financial records		Teach IELTS	

	Conduct interviews					

P4						
	First Job	Continued Education	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	1998—2001	3 years in Britain	2004—2016	9 months	2016-08/2019	2 years
Job Title	Administrative Assistant		Evaluator		Editor	
Organization	The Ministry of Education		Education Ministry		Publishing House	
City	Beijing		Beijing		Beijing	
Job Responsibilities	Facilitate communications within the office Implement new procedures and administrative systems		Manage accreditation and appraisal of foreign academic diplomas		Edit books Contact authors	

P5						
	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Continued Education	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	07/2013—06/2015	N/A	2015—2017	4 years (Ph.D. in Economics in Wuhan)	08/2021—interview (11/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Manager		Administrative Secretary		Associate Professor	
Organization	China CITIC Bank		Southwest University of		Southwest University of	

			Political Science & Law		Political Science & Law	
City	Chongqing		Chongqing		Chongqing	
Job Responsibilities	Provide training and development for employees Facilitate new employee orientation		Arrange meetings and take minutes Answer and direct phone calls Perform other general secretarial duties as requested		Teach Research Mentor students	

P6

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	2010—2016	1.5 years	2018—Interview (03/2021)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Job Title	HR Specialist		Marketing			
Organization	Department Store		Toy Retail			
City	Zhenjiang		Nanjing			
Job Responsibilities	Recruit Train Offer general feedback in performance reviews		Marketing Promote the brand			

P7

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break

Time Frame	07/2013—07/2015	1 year	07/2016—02/2017	5 months	2017-interview (04/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Legal Assistant		Legal Assistant		Judge Assistant	
Organization	Foreign-investment Corporation		Law Firm		The Court	
City	Shanghai		Xiamen			
Job Responsibilities	Support lawyers with various tasks, such as communicating with clients and preparing trials.		Collect and organize evidence and other legal documents for attorney review and case preparation		Research a potential defendant Assist with court trials	

			P8			

	First Job	Career Break	Continued Education	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	2011—2013	05/2013-01/2014 8 months	01/2014—12/2019	1 year 8 months	08/2021-Interview (10/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Project Manager		Research Assistant as a Graduate in Public Health		Assistant Professor	
Organization	World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies		Tier 1 Research University in the U.S.		Shanghai University of Medicine & Health Sciences	
City	Beijing		Texas		Shanghai	

Job Responsibilities	Organize international conferences Translate conference minutes from Chinese to English		Research Provide instructional support for professors		Research Publish Teach	

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	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	03/2015—08/2015	1 year	2016—2017	3 months	2017-Interview (03/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Journalist		Manager		Sales	
Organization	Publishing House		Real Estate Company		Insurance Company	
City	Hangzhou		Hangzhou		Shanghai	
Job Responsibilities	Conduct interviews Research and write informational news articles		Draft and implement marketing strategies		Provide customer service Facilitate training on sales skills	

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	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	2009-2014	5 years (4 years continued	2019-2020	N/A	10/2020-interview (04/2021)	N/A

Job Title	Administrative Assistant	education, and 1 year career break)	Small Business Owner		Editor	
Organization	State-owned enterprise		Self-start-business		Book Publishing House	
City	Wuxi		Nanjing		Nanjing	
Job Responsibilities	Schedule appointments Write and edit instructional documents		Use vendor machines to sell pre-cooked food		Edit books Select books for publishing	

P11

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	2010—2013	1 year 5 months	10/2014—2018	1 year	12/2019-interview (04/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Trainer		Teacher		Business Owner	
Organization	City Emergency Planning Association		Daycare center		English tutoring center for children	
City	Nanjing		Nanjing		Nanjing	
Job Responsibilities	Translate emergency planning materials from English to Chinese Conduct training Conduct literature review on the topic of		Bilingual teaching		Teach English	

	emergency planning					

			P12			

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Third Job	Career Break	Fourth Job
Time Frame	2006—2014	1 year	2015—2016	2016-2017	1 year	2019-interview (04/2012)
Job Title	Teacher and Operations Manager		Small Business Owner	Teacher		Senior Teacher
Organization	Private Educational Center		Education Institution	Special Education Center		Special Education Institute
City	Wuxi		Wuxi	Shanghai		Shanghai
Job Responsibilities	Teach Formulate strategies Procure materials and resources		Run a self-owned small-scale daycare center	Teach students with special needs		Teach Communi-cate with parents

			P13			

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	06/2010—10/2010	N/A	10/2010—07/2014	3 years (2 years for continued	2017-2018	Ph.D. in Internatio-

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Continued Education	Third Job	Fourth Job
Job Title	Foreign Trade Merchandiser		Project Manager	education, 1 year break due to illness)	Teacher	nal Business
Organization	Foreign trade company		State-owned business		College	
City	Guangzhou		Guangzhou		Sichuan	
Job Responsibilities	Assist with trading activities between China, India, and Russia.		Marketing Translation		Teach Research Mentor students	

P14						
	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Continued Education	Third Job	Fourth Job
Time Frame	12/2009—06/2012	1 year and 3 months	09/2013—05/2014	2014/9—2015/08	08/2015-07/2016	12/2019-Interview (05/2021)
Job Title	Communication Specialist		Operation/Public Relations	Master's in Marketing in Britain	Freelancer	Staff
Organization	Foreign Company		NGO		N/A	Fudan University
City	Shanghai		Shanghai		Shanghai	Shanghai
Job Responsibilities	Create effective communication strategies for the company Communicate with media regularly		Collaborate with the market team Manage media inquiries Provide training for new employees		Marketing Plan events, seminars, and press conferences	Provide administra-tive support to ensure efficient operation of office Organize meetings

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| | | | | | | and take minutes |

				P15		
	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	10/2012—09/2014	6 months	04/2015—12/2016	3 years	2020—interview (03/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Junior Attorney		Senior Attorney		Legal Affairs lawyer	
Organization	Foreign Law Firm		Foreign Law Firm		Law Firm	
City	Beijing		Shanghai		Shanghai	
Job Responsibilities	Assist senior attorneys in researching and analyzing the law on complex issues Assist with the execution of legal content projects		Communicate with clients Prepare the investigations and trials in assigned areas		Provide legal advice on management issues in a company's in-house legal department	

				P16		
	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break

Time Frame	07/2009—06/2011	N/A	07/2011—03/2018	Two years	03/2020—interview (04/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Overseas Marketing Manager		Market Supervision		Teacher	
Organization	Company Limited by Shares		State Tobacco Monopoly Administration		Middle School	
City	Yantai		Yantai		Yantai	
Job Responsibilities	Provide customer service Prepare sales quotes Communicate with potential buyers		Regulate the tobacco market, such as identifying fake cigarettes		Teach Mentor students	
			P17			
	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Fourth Job
Time Frame	2000—2001	1 year	2002—2015	1 year	2016-2021	Freelancer WeChat Business
Job Title	Marketing Specialist		Manager		Marketing Specialist	
Organization	Foreign Business		Private Business (A Start-up Company)		Private Business	
City	Shanghai		Shanghai		Shanghai	
Job Responsibilities	Design and implement marketing projects		Manage small project teams Develop business management goals		Design marketing projects Organize and coordinate operations	

				Assist with new employee onboarding			

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	First Job	Second Job	Third Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	2012—2014	2014-2015	2014—2020	1 year	2021-interview (05/2021)	N/A
Job Title	Flight Attendant	Clerk	Lecturer		Freelancer	
Organization	Airline Company	Government	Flight Attendant Training Institute		WeChat Business	
City	Shenzhen	Inner Mongolia	Inner Mongolia		Inner Mongolia	
Job Responsibilities	Ensure the safety, security, and comfort of airline passengers	Organize conferences and take minutes	Provide education for flight attendants Mentor flight attendants		Provide customer service Marketing	

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	First Job	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break	Third Job
Time Frame	2013—2015	2015-2017	2 months	2017-2018	3 years	2021-interview (04/2021)
Job Title	Accountant	Accountant		Accountant		Freelancer
Organization	Private Business	Private Business		Food Industry		WeChat Business
City	Xingtai	Handan		Handan		Handan

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| Job Responsibilities | Provide financial information to management Document financial transactions | Provide financial information to management Document financial transactions | | Manage financial information Prepare payments to employees | | Design tailored customer services Marketing |

			P20			

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	2013—03/2015	1.5 years	09/2016—interview (04/2021)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Job Title	Architectural Designer		Teacher			
Organization	Private Business		Secondary Specialized School			
City	Handan		Handan			
Job Responsibilities	Plan and design the layouts for buildings Meet with clients to discuss the design requirements		Teach architecture courses Mentor students			

			P21			

	First Job	Career Break	Second Job	Career Break	Third Job	Career Break
Time Frame	10/2010—01/2016	2 years	03/2018—interview (10/2021)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Job Title	HR Specialist		HR Manager			

	HR Manager				
Organization	Wanke Residential Real Estate Developer		Guorui Real Estate		
City	Wuxi, Suzhou, Hangzhou		Suzhou		
Job Responsibilities	Hire Train new staff Provide performance evaluations		Hire Design and provide on-the-job training Provide timely performance reviews		

Categories and Subcategories

The data analysis identified nine categories and 43 subcategories of the investigation of women's career interruptions. In the following section, I describe each category and the corresponding subcategories. In addition, I provide direct quotes from the participants to support the findings.

Table 10 includes the category names, corresponding subcategories, and how often participants mentioned each subcategory. For example, the subcategory *receiving educational and vocational training* under the major category *women availing themselves of career interruptions* was mentioned 19 times by 12 participants.

Table 10

Categories, Subcategories, and the Frequency of Participants Mentioning Each Subcategory

Category	Subcategory and Frequency	
Women perceiving career interruptions	• Participants defining career interruptions (21 participants, 21 references) • Participants perceiving career interruptions (12 participants, 22 references) • Society perceiving career interruptions (7 participants, 10 references)	
Women working in China	• Working for private businesses (14 participants, 29 references) • Working for state-owned enterprises (11 participants, 23 references) • Working for foreign businesses (6 participants, 8 references)	
Women making career choices	Internal	• Sharing career values with coworkers (11 participants, 16 references) • Finding career interests (10 participants, 16 references) • Suffering mentally (7 participants, 11 references) • Lacking a required credential (7 participants, 10 references) • Suffering physically (4 participants, 6 references)

Table 10 Continued

Category	Subcategory and Frequency
	External • Family influencing career decisions (20 participants, 67 references)
	• Organizational culture affecting employees' decisions (12 participants, 25 references)
	• Leadership style affecting team members (12 participants, 22 references)
	• Relocating (9 participant, 10 references)
	• Comparing salary and benefits (8 participants, 11 references)
	• Labor market undergoing changes (6 participants, 8 references)
	• Evaluating the career prospects (5 participants, 12 references)
	• Experiencing job loss (3 participants, 4 references)
Women availing themselves of career interruptions	Reflecting on career decision-making (19 participants, 45 references) • Getting mental health care (13 participants, 28 references) • Performing family responsibilities (13 participants, 19 references) • Pursuing educational and vocational training (12 participants, 19 references) • Working (9 participants, 21 references) • Evaluating financial status (7 participants, 7 references) • Entertaining themselves (4 participants, 8 references) • Getting physical health care (4 participants, 5 references)
Women returning to work	• Identifying market trends (19 participants, 41 references) • Evaluating current job (17 participants, 30 references) • Preparing to return (15 participants, 34 references) • Receiving intergenerational support (12 participants, 25 references) • Choosing to return (11 participants, 16 references)
Organizations not paying enough attention to returners	• Returners lacking resources (11 participants, 18 references) • Some leaders providing support (9 participants, 15 references)
Society creating barriers for women's return	• Women experiencing stereotypes, discrimination, and gender segregation (19 participants, 50 references) • Returners experiencing age discrimination (7 participants, 7 references) • Affirmative action causing negative effects (3 participants, 4 references) • Comparing cultures (4 participants, 4 references)

Table 10 Continued

Category	Subcategory and Frequency
Women finding opportunities in unplanned events	• Setting objectives (15 participants, 18 references) • Experiencing barriers (external) (9 participants, 11 references) • Making occupational choices (8 participants, 13 references) • Having struggles (internal) (7 participants, 11 references)
Women offering advice to peers and organizations	• Women offering advice to individuals (17 participants, 38 references) • Women offering advice to organizations (12 participants, 13 references)

Women Perceiving Career Interruptions

Drawing on their life experiences, the participants shared their personal definitions and conceptualization of career interruptions. Additionally, they explained how career interruptions are perceived by Chinese society from their observation.

Participants Defining Career Interruptions

The definition of career interruptions is quite blurry in the literature. Therefore, I asked participants to describe their own definitions of career interruptions (see Table 11) to identify some commonly accepted beliefs about career interruptions. Below, I specifically highlight elements that significantly enhance our understanding of career interruptions. First, four participants (P2, P12, P13, and P15) used the term *discontinuity* to represent career interruptions. Nevertheless, there were subtle differences in the use of the word *discontinuity*. P2 said that the career interruption is a discontinuity between two jobs. P15 added that the two jobs need to be in the same field. In contrast, P12 and P13 identified a work/career path discontinuity as a career break. Second, three participants (P3, P8, and P15) mentioned that only breaks that are longer than six months could count as career interruptions. Third, three participants suggested that a career interruption means losing a stable income (P5, P16, and P20) or a full-time contract (P10

and P14). Three participants (P1, P6, and P19) defined career breaks as the status of nonemployment. Fourth, P4 and P21 said that external forces often caused career interruptions. P11 added that career interruptions could be driven by external forces or self-initiated. Finally, unlike a permanent exit, a career interruption implies a strong intention to return to the workplace (P17). To sum it up, the participants perceived that a career interruption can be defined as a period of six months or more of unemployment between jobs.

It is also worth noting that five participants (P2, P6, P12, P18, P19) mixed career interruptions with other career-related concepts such as career shifts and job loss. For example, P18 defined a career interruption as either unemployment after experiencing job loss or a career shift. Some participants even held opposing views in describing career interruptions. For example, P2 and P6 thought a career shift from one field to another was one type of career interruption. P15 argued that a career interruption occurs when there is a discontinuity between two jobs in the same occupation/field. Another good example is P8 and P11. P8 noted that planned events (e.g., education-related leaves) are not career interruptions, even if they result in a career disconnection. However, P11 insisted that planned breaks are still career interruptions.

Table 11

Participants' Definitions of Career Interruption

Participant	Definition
P1	Career interruption refers to a relatively long period of unemployment.
P2	Career interruption is the discontinuity between two jobs. For example, when I changed my job from a middle school teacher to a civil servant, I started all over again in a new area. There was a career interruption in between. However, if I started a new job without changing my occupation (still working in the teaching profession), I don't see it as a career interruption.
P3	It is a period of non-employment that lasts more than six months.
P4	The career path was cut off by external forces.
P5	Career interruptions equal no pay. I see pursuing a higher degree as an interruption because it is different from being employed. For example, I only receive 2,000 Chinese yuan per month as my salary.

Table 11 Continued

Participant	Definition
P6	My definition of career interruptions includes two aspects: first, a career interruption is the termination of a labor contract and a status of non-employment. Second, there must be a career shift. For example, I used to be an HR specialist, but I changed my occupation. That means interrupting my career.
P7	Career interruptions depart from society's assumption of a normal career path. The assumption is that the career path should be continuous and non-stop. Career interruptions, whether voluntary or involuntary, challenge the assumption. It is very much like trees. Society assumes that a tree will grow upward and straight; however, my career tree has many branches stretching in different directions.
P8	I took an education leave in my gap year. I don't think pursuing higher education counts as a career interruption because it was planned. Things planned, even if they result in a career disconnection, are not career interruptions. And career breaks shorter than six months are not career interruptions either.
P9	It means leaving the current job, voluntarily or involuntarily, without adequate preparation.
P10	Career interruptions equal the termination of a labor contract (with or without pay).
P11	For women, most career interruptions are enforced by external forces. But some career interruptions could also be self-planned for many reasons, such as losing interest or lacking self-growth in the previous occupation.
P12	There are two types of career interruptions. One is a discontinuity of work. The other is, for some reason, you changed your occupation when you have reached a certain level in one area.
P13	A career interruption is an escape from the workplace and a discontinuity in one's career path.
P14	If you are experiencing a career interruption, it means you don't have a full-time contract.
P15	I think a career interruption is a relatively long (more than six months) career window. I also want to add that moving from one field to another with a gap in between is not a career interruption. A career interruption is supposed to be a discontinuity you experienced when walking on the same path.
P16	It means lost earning capacity.
P17	A career interruption is a pause, implying a strong intention to return to work. It is different from retirement, which indicates no return to the workplace.
P18	I think there are two types of career interruptions. One is not being able to find another job after experiencing a job loss. The other is making a career shift from one field to another.
P19	Career interruptions imply non-employment or career shifts.
P20	I see career interruptions as a period without a stable income.
P21	A career interruption means being forced out of the workplace.

Interestingly, P7 gave an analogy between career development and tree growth. She mentioned that society prefers career paths resembling fastigiate trees that grow vertically upward with erect branches (e.g., blue spruce). But her career resembled an open-headed irregular tree (e.g., Tartarian maple), stretching its limbs in different directions. P7 concluded that both trees hold themselves upright and grow tremendously despite their different shapes.

The participant interviews also called attention to two significant yet long-overlooked questions in conceptualizing career interruptions. The first question is: Is a break for educational purposes is considered a career interruption? At the study design stage, I specified that an educational break is a career interruption based on the reviewed literature. Theunissen et al. (2011) classified employment interruptions into five types: family leave, unemployment, self-employment, educational leave, and other interruptions such as travel. However, some participants (e.g., P5) considered that an educational leave is a career interruption because educational leaves often go hand-in-hand with low pay and financial dependency. In contrast, P8 emphasized that her educational leave was planned; therefore, it should not be considered a career interruption. I believe both views are valid, but I did not include women who had only educational leaves in the present study. Some participants (P4, P5, and P8) took educational leaves. They were included because they also experienced other types of career interruptions that were longer than one year.

The second question is: Is a self-employed individual experiencing a career interruption? Following Theunissen et al.'s (2011) classification, the answer is "yes" because there is a lack of stable income or a long-term contract in the self-employment period. In addition, two self-employment types warrant special attention—freelance and a WeChat business (a specific type of direct sales supported by the mobile phone application WeChat). Freelancers are individuals

who take on contract work for companies or organizations. For example, P14 and P17 took freelance jobs. However, both participants admitted that the freelance jobs, added income and experiences, but they were not stable and well-recognized by employers. Although WeChat businesses are unique to the Chinese context, it is considered a type of career interruption in this study because the WeChat business is a type of self-employment that is consistent with Theunissen et al.'s (2011) classifications.

As the data show, defining career interruptions is more complicated than it seems. As the economy grows and more career types emerge, the definition of career interruption is likely to evolve over time.

Participants Perceiving Career Interruptions

The participants admitted that career interruptions require extra attention in many aspects. First, it is important to consider whether it is necessary to completely pause a career. P7 was concerned that many young people today hastily interrupt their careers without serious consideration. She said, "I've seen people quit just because they don't like the job anymore. That is not a smart decision." Echoing what P7 said, P16 shared her experience of quitting a job without another one lined up. Reflecting on this career decision, she admitted that it was an impulsive and risky decision that caused her tremendous stress later on. Second, career interruptions might create challenges in dealing with the discrepancies between expectations and reality and upward comparison (comparing ourselves with someone who is perceived as better than us). P12 and P13 reflected on these expectation discrepancies and upward comparison after they had career interruptions:

> As a project manager, it took a considerable amount of time to build my experience and
> credentials. However, when I chose to interrupt my career, it became inevitable to

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experience a growing gap between my coworkers and me. We entered the field at nearly the same time, but I failed to catch up with others' skills, experiences, and networks (due to the career break). When I wanted to return, I found that I had been replaced. (P12)

When I returned after my career break, it was very challenging. Starting all over again in a brand-new area means leaving my accumulated experiences and networks behind. It was much more difficult than I thought. (P13)

Third, the participants discussed practical concerns about career interruptions. For example, P5 mentioned that health insurance and social welfare in China hinge on one's job. Therefore, getting sick during a career break was too expensive. Moreover, an extended career interruption might even affect one's retirement package because it would reduce the years of service at a company. Despite all the challenges, P3 believed that every career break would eventually end up with a job:

All career interruptions, extended or short ones, end up with a job; sometimes it ends up with a dream job, sometimes, it ends up with a lousy job. We need to remember that at the end of the day, you can always find a job and end your career interruption. (P3)

Of the 21 participants, 16 found that their career interruption was positive. Seven participants perceived that their career interruption was unique, constructive, and rewarding:

I spent my one-year career break on self-care. It was necessary because I had reached the point of burnout working in a big law firm. My second career interruption was only three-months long. Even though it was pretty short, I felt grateful for it. It allowed me to enrich my inner world. My career interruption was a time when I didn't belong to any company or organization. Neither did I have to live up to my parents' expectations. The quality break was so precious that it made me who I am today. (P7)

I did not have a full-time job, that's all. I don't think career interruptions are negative or detrimental. To tell the truth, they are neutral or even positive. The fact that more and more people are taking career interruptions implies the abundant possibilities out there [in the labor market]. (P14)

I have experienced two career interruptions. Career interruptions are great for acquiring knowledge and thinking about one's future. In my second break, I realized that this was a good opportunity to know myself better. I realized it was not necessary to join the corporate rat race. Instead, I needed to pursue what I believe is important and stick to it. In my career breaks, I tried many things I had never done before. Not everything worked out as expected, but I had the opportunity to get to know people from different walks of life. It was super fun for me. (P15)

Having experienced career interruptions, I am deeply appreciative of my current job. I know how hard it is to get where I am now. In addition, I could not change my profession without taking a break and preparing for the teaching qualifications. I always wanted to be a teacher, and now my dream has come true. (P16)

Many of my friends felt sorry for me when I resigned. They thought I had left my decades of industrial experiences behind. I don't think so. My work experiences are transferrable and can be used somewhere else one day. My career interruption gave me ample time to stay with my family. It was more important [to me]. (P17)

According to the participants in this study, career interruptions could be constructive because taking a break can help individuals resume work with more energy and motivation when they return. Career interruptions also provide a good opportunity to reflect on previous

experiences and rethink their aspirations and pursuits. In addition, various activities and events during career interruptions could instill new blood into one's future life.

Society Perceiving Career Interruptions

The participants also shared what they believed were society's perceptions of career interruptions. For example, P7 noted that Chinese society perceives an ideal career trajectory as linear, upward, and continuous. She added that society interprets career interruptions as deviant and distorted from a normal career path. Society's negative perceptions of career interruptions affect individuals' feelings and thoughts. P3 said she felt guilty while traveling during her career breaks. Whenever she had fun, her inner critic would harshly attack her, making her feel shame and regret.

Women Working in China

Three types of enterprises coexist in China: state-owned, private, and foreign businesses. State-owned enterprises are government-owned business entities. Therefore, they often receive substantial government support and guidance. Private enterprises, referring to businesses that started with private funds, were legalized by the Chinese government in 1978 (Wang, 1990). At the same time, China enacted open-door policies to attract foreign investment, leading to substantial growth of foreign businesses. Of the 21 participants, six worked for foreign businesses, 14 for private companies, and 11 for state-owned enterprises. In addition, 12 participants worked in more than one sector. For example, P6 had her first job in a private domestic company and her second job in a foreign business. Their diverse experiences and reflections offer rich insights into China economic structures, employment policies, labor market, and career development. Below, I discuss the participants' experiences of working in Chinese state-owned, private, and foreign enterprises, respectively.

Working for State-owned Enterprises—Secure and Static

In China, jobs in state-owned enterprises were once named *iron rice bowls*, which implies guaranteed job security and a stable income. Many participants admitted that working in state-owned enterprises brought stability to their lives, and their daily work tasks generally required little effort. P4 said, "Working in a state-owned business, we don't need to worry too much about making profits or surviving in a bleak economy." P10 added that the career path was pretty stable in state-owned enterprises, "I only worked around four hours per day. It was the most mundane job. Ranks were given based on seniority. I just had to wait for my turn." Since everyone in the state-owned enterprises had to wait for their turn for promotion, there was no motivation to work hard. P20 explained that: "Our salary was based on seniority, so there was not much competition between me and my coworkers." Speaking of welfare and benefits, P8 shared, "It was an ideal job for me. The institution even helped me obtain Hukou (i.e., household registration certificate) in Beijing. Usually, migrants from other cities can only get temporary residency permits." P5 summed it up as follows:

> My salary as an advisor working in a state-owned university was pretty low. But my work was easy from 9 to 5, with no extra hours. My coworkers and I hung out a lot. The supervisors were pleasant to work for and never gave tough feedback. (P5)

However, stability has side effects. Some participants talked about two prominent drawbacks of state-owned enterprises: bureaucracy and lack of motivation.

Bureaucracy, nepotism, and seniority. Bureaucracy, nepotism, and seniority were pervasive in state-owned enterprises. The participants discussed the negative aspects:

The institution I worked for was filled with people hired based on nepotism. Thus, there are many unqualified people with low level education. I found it very difficult to accept that sometimes a far less qualified person got promoted ahead of you. (P16)

I worked as a project manager in a government institution. Interpersonal relationships are pretty complicated there. I know many people out there are fighting for my position. To be honest, I don't like my job at all. I felt I wasted much time dealing with office politics. (P4)

Since our work was effortless, people had a lot of time to do other things, like gossiping. Gossiping was rampant where I worked. When it comes to promotion opportunities, it was all about seniority instead of capability. It took years to wait for your turn. (P5)

Lack of motivation. Working in state-owned enterprises is like having a wheel stuck in a groove. Individuals are trapped in a fixed course of action. In the end, they lose motivation due to their meaningless jobs. P6 recalled, "For a very long time, I could not find meaning in my job because anyone can do it. I mean ANYONE." Another participant also complained that she was in a rut:

I feel as if I were a screw in a giant machine that repeatedly functioned on a daily basis. There was no room for creativity. It was boring. Because it was not interesting, the job became unattractive even when I was promoted to the highest level of management. (P10)

Another cause of the lack of motivation was the low wages. P18 associated salary with self-worth, emphasizing that "it was an effortless job, but also a low-wage job. The salary was so low that it did not reflect my self-worth. I even needed financial support from my parents."

Working for Private Enterprises—Flexible and Risky

Despite their legal status, private enterprises in China are disadvantaged in terms of access to loans and tax relief compared to state-owned enterprises (Borst, 2021). The fundamental reason is the government's concern that private enterprises might cause social stratification, which is incompatible with the country's socialist values (Wang, 1990). Since private enterprises receive limited support from the government, they are vulnerable in a turbulent market and global environment. P19 lost two jobs when the private businesses where she worked declared bankruptcy. Sometimes the changing regulations also caused tremendous challenges for the private sector. For example, P12 ran a small tutoring center. Between June and July 2021, the Chinese government launched a series of sweeping regulations, such as a ban on for-profit tutoring services targeting k-12 public education. As the owner of a small tutoring center, P12 was less affected than education and technology giants such as New Oriental Education. However, she found it more challenging to continue her private business.

Additionally, the participants recalled managerial issues in the private companies where they worked. For example, P9 once worked for a medical supply company. Due to some disagreements among the executives, one of her projects was terminated without further notice. Some of the participants also expressed concern about private businesses violating laws. P13 worked for a cellphone manufacturer where she witnessed many cases of labor disputes and illegal practices, such as managers secretly cutting employees' medical insurance. Similarly, P20 worked in a design company that withheld wages or took unreasonable deductions from paychecks.

Despite these problems, the participants reported the benefits of working for private businesses. For example, private companies have easier access and more flexible hiring

standards than state-owned and foreign businesses. P19 was an accountant who worked in different companies, including a dessert shop, airport hiring center, and tourism center. It was easy for her to get a new job, though it was not long term. P11 was home taking care of her child when she found a job in a different city. The company was flexible enough to allow her to work remotely. Another benefit was vitality. Private businesses encourage creative ideas and a cohesive culture. P17 worked in a start-up private business and found that the company environment was very conducive to learning:

> There is a honeymoon period for every start-up company. During that period, I found many things could push my limits. There was a cohesive organizational culture in which everyone felt driven and motivated. I never regret my choice because I grew tremendously. (P17)

Working for Foreign Enterprises—Remunerative and Stressful

As a fast-growing economy, China attracted a substantial number of foreign businesses, such as Unilever, General Motors, and Philips Electronics, to name a few. However, foreign enterprises were subject to China's fluctuating regulatory environment and limited access to government support. For example, in January 2020, China abolished the wholly foreign-owned enterprise (i.e., WFOE, foreign-owned limited liability company without joint ventures with Chinese companies) and required all WFOEs to transition to so-called foreign-funded enterprises within five years.

In my study, only six participants worked in foreign businesses. Working in foreign companies is financially rewarding because of the high-paying salary and great benefits. What is equally attractive to Chinese young people is the westernized organizational culture. P3 talked about these benefits:

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The foreign company I worked for has a great organizational culture. For example, the company gave most employees the option to work from home. In addition, I felt very comfortable working with my peers. While working together, my coworkers were more focused on their businesses rather than gossiping around. I loved it when people respected other people's boundaries. (P3)

Additionally, the participants elaborated on other benefits such as knowledge and skill development:

I was working in a consulting firm. It was my dream job. Every day there was so much for me to learn. The partners in the consulting firm were great mentors. They guided me through the processes and reminded me of all the details. (P3)

The law firm I worked in was one of the top firms worldwide. It was a dream job for every law school student. As soon as I started my job, I realized it is a leading firm attracting the most extraordinary people to work for it. I was able to find my role models who never stopped pursuing excellence. Overall, it was a great learning experience for me. (P7)

My area of expertise was more like branding or public relations. There were no training sessions or orientations when I got on board. But my supervisor had very rich overseas management experience, and he taught me patiently from the start. I learned a lot from him. I also had the opportunity to interact with many stakeholders, such as the vendors and other departments. (P14)

The first law firm I worked for had branches in Shanghai, Beijing, and Hongkong. I gained substantial expertise. As junior attorneys, we were required to rotate and work in

different locations and branches. Therefore, I had the opportunity to travel and work in many other cities and offices. (P15)

However, there was a trade-off. The fast-paced work led to employee burnout. When working in a top law firm in Shanghai, P7 often worked until 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. or all night without sleep. Later, she was diagnosed with anxiety and depression. Her situation deteriorated, and for a whole week, she woke up in the middle of the night with tears on her face and pillow, feeling swamped. She also felt stressed out working with people who always outperformed her, "I used to be an honor student in the law school. But now I feel I am alienated and invisible." Later she resigned and spent years recovering from exhaustion and mental stress.

Women Making Career Choices

Individuals' career trajectories were heavily influenced by their decision-making processes. In my study, all the participants had at least one career interruption. So, the questions are: Why did they opt out of the workplace? What did they do during the career break? When did they decide to return to work? Drawing on their life experiences, the participants identified both external and internal factors that could affect one's decision to take a career break or reenter the workplace. Table 12 summarizes the factors and frequency of references to the factors.

Table 12

Career Decision-Making Factors and the Frequency of References

	Factor	# of Participants	# of References
External Factors	Family influencing career decisions	20	67
	Organizational culture affecting employees' decisions	12	25
	Leadership style affecting team members	12	22
	Relocating	9	10

Table 12 Continued

	Factor	# of Participants	# of References
	Comparing salary and benefits	8	11
	Labor market undergoing changes	6	8
	Evaluating the career prospects	5	12
	Experiencing job loss	3	4
	Commuting	1	1
Internal Factors	Sharing career values with coworkers	11	16
	Finding career interests	10	16
	Suffering mentally	7	11
	Lacking a required credential	7	10
	Suffering physically	4	6

External Factors

Family influencing career decisions. As revealed in Table 4, family reasons are predominant factors that affect women's career choices. Of the 21 participants, 20 reported being affected by family incidents, family responsibilities, or family opinions in their career decision-making.

The women in this study were the primary caregivers in their family, which affected their career decisions. P4 interrupted her career twice, both for childcaring reasons. She was pregnant with her first child at forty years old. As a Christian, she felt it was a gift from God, so she resigned and was fully committed to taking care of her child. Her second child had special needs, and the doctors advised her that the earlier she intervened, the better the child's situation would be. Therefore, P4 opted out again to take care of her second child. Similarly, P11 opted out of the workplace twice for her daughter. When her daughter was a newborn baby, P11 opted so she could breastfeed and care for her child. Later, she opted out again because her daughter transitioned from kindergarten to elementary school. As a single mother, P11 supported her

daughter during the adjustment period with her parent's financial support. She concluded, "My daughter's needs at different life stages shaped my whole career trajectory."

In terms of career planning and decision making, husbands' careers often took priority. Early in her career, P1 quit her job and moved to the United States because her husband was admitted to a Ph.D. program. In 2020, P1 moved back to China when her husband found a faculty position there. Since then, she juggled between work and family because she had to work and take care of her two children. She said, "Childcaring is very demanding work. I spent three hours breastfeeding every day." P8 faced a similar situation. She resigned from a job that she perceived as ideal and moved to the United States due to her husband's career opportunities. When her husband's career moved to a new stage, they returned to China. She admitted that she missed many chances to advance her own career because she was the primary caregiver. All the decisions she made centered on her husband's career development, aiming to optimize his career prospects. P5 also modified her career based on her husband's career. She wanted to work in Guangzhou, China, but her husband chose to work in Chongqing. In the end, she gave in and found a job in Chongqing.

Other participants' careers were also affected by family responsibilities and pressure from the family. For example, P9 had to take a career break to take care of her mother who was very sick. When her mother recovered, P9 accompanied her to many follow-up visits. The frequent doctor's visits and eldercare made it impossible for P9 to continue her work. Furthermore, family members' beliefs and attitudes towards different industries heavily influenced the participants' career decisions. P2 quit her job as a volunteer teacher because her parents strongly urged her to find a guaranteed job with a stable income and benefits. Similarly,

P7 was advised by her parents to take the civil service exam and work in the government system, so she did.

Organizational culture affecting employees' decisions. Organizational culture emerged as a crucial factor in the women's career choices. A hostile work environment filled with microaggressions often forced women to consider downshifting or opting out. P17 shared her experiences of working under abusive supervision and in an organization that tolerated abusive employee treatment by supervisors:

> I later realized that my supervisor motivated us by criticizing us to the core. For example, he said things like, "You failed my expectations," "There is no way that you could survive in the company." He kept telling me I was not good enough. You know, it is exhausting to argue with someone like this. I felt miserable. There was another girl who was always a star employee. She suffered a mental collapse after being criticized again and again. Before I left, I heard she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. That abusive supervisor got away with his behavior because the organization didn't care. I think there were huge problems with the managerial team. The work climate won't change, so I decided to leave. (P17)

In contrast, a supportive, family-friendly, and unbiased work environment can be extremely encouraging. P14 had a highly positive experience working on an all-female team:

> My supervisor was not married. However, she was very understanding when working with married people and mothers with kids. Under her protection, our team survived even during the most challenging times without losing any team member. Our team is pretty diverse. We had fresh graduates. We also had middle-aged women with two kids. We never discriminated by age. You know, the labor market often discriminates against

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women with kids, assuming that they cannot fully engage in their work. But she said

women with kids actually value their jobs more. (P14)

Leadership style affecting team members. The leadership style was a major influencer

on employees' career decisions. Organizational leaders choose different approaches to provide

direction and implement plans. P14 shared her experience working with a toxic supervisor:

> He [the supervisor] was never satisfied with my work. Working with him made me doubt
>
> myself. I had never experienced that level of self-doubt before. I pushed myself to the
>
> limit and still could not meet his standards. I was mentally and physically exhausted. At
>
> the same time, we were short-staffed. I worked till 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. every day. Once I
>
> was assigned the task of drafting a product brochure in English. His [The supervisor's]
>
> English proficiency level was pretty low, but he rejected all the revision suggestions
>
> proposed by our editor. As you can see, he was very difficult to work with. (P14)

P13 also called attention to a severe leadership gender gap at the managerial level. She

said that men greatly outnumber women at the management level in many Chinese organizations.

Sometimes it is very challenging for male leaders to put themselves in female employees' shoes.

Hence, many organizational policies and strategies are inconsiderate of women's challenges and

struggles. However, P7 argued that gender did not matter that much in making a good leader:

> I worked in a law firm. Big law firms are male-dominated. Women who make themselves
>
> partners are very competitive. Sometimes these female leaders are stereotyped as distant
>
> and cold. But the female leaders I met were very considerate and understanding. In fact, I
>
> do not think gender is a determinator. The attitudes towards employees were more related
>
> to the leaders' perceptions and values than their gender identities. I had two male

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supervisors who were open-minded and supportive. Both of them had overseas experience which expanded their horizons. (P7)

Other external factors. Other external factors included relocating, comparing salary and benefits, the labor market undergoing changes, evaluating the career prospects, experiencing job loss, and commuting. Below, I discuss these factors briefly because they were less mentioned in the participants' narratives, as indicated in Table 4. First, moving from one place to another could lead to an abrupt halt in one's career development. P10 preferred living in Nanjing in southern China. Therefore, she moved to the city and started all over again. Another practical concern for the participants was salary and benefits. P18 had a low-wage job that only paid her 315 to 473 U.S. dollars per month. She complained, "That could barely cover my gas bill." Later, she quit her job.

Drawing on her observation and analysis, P10 concluded that the labor market was entering a brutal winter. Therefore, she opted out of the private businesses and reentered in a more secure government job. Similar to P10, some participants saw no future in their current position by evaluating their career prospects. For example, P9 worked for a newspaper publisher, which she defined as a dying industry. After taking a career break, she entered a different field—real estate. In other situations, the job loss was often unpredictable. P19 worked in a company that reached the shutdown point in 2017. As a result, many employees were laid off, including her. Lastly, commuting could affect individuals' career decisions. P9 worked in Hangzhou, and one of the primary reasons for her resignation was the high commuting cost. "I spent two hours commuting to my work. The public transportation system in Hangzhou was not very convenient. I can only call cabs. It cost me so much money and time that I had to quit my job."

Internal Factors

People differ in their health, credentials, abilities, personalities, and knowledge, and these factors could affect their career-related decisions. The participants discussed several of these factors.

Sharing career values with coworkers. P12 defined career value as the alignment between individuals and the organizations' long-term and short-term aspirations. P12's most recent job was working with special needs children in an educational facility. She emphasized that the organization's goals aligned with her values, thus bringing her happiness and satisfaction. However, it is not easy to find the right company. P9 spent years and finally found her ideal match—working in a foreign insurance company where she could be true to herself at work. For example, her supervisor cautioned her that sales is about finding the right customers, not devoting all your time and energy to pleasing others. She noted that she finally felt more fulfilled than ever.

Finding career interests. According to P16, career interest is more related to one's passion and fulfillment in doing some specific work. P16 was assigned to perform public relations tasks by the company. She considered it boring to build relationships with existing customers and reach potential customers. "It took three to five years to find a new customer," she said. The mismatch between P16's career interest of being a teacher and her job as a public relations specialist led to her resignment:

> Being a teacher has always been my dream. Teaching is a sacred job. It is like putting a seed of knowledge in the ground and waiting for the miracle to happen. Treating the students with love and patience, we help them carry our positive influences for their whole lifetime. I thoroughly enjoyed the process. I find meaning in my work by

impacting my students' lives, and I love this job more than any other job I have ever done in my life. (P16)

Suffering mentally. Health concerns could drive individuals out of the workplace. In my study, mental health issues were more frequently mentioned than physical health problems. Seven out of 21 participants reported mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, or panic attacks. The poor mental health compelled these women to rethink the meaning of work and life and choose between health and a paycheck. P15 found it challenging to perform daily tasks due to severe depression. Without timely intervention, P15's severe depression evolved into bipolar disorder. After struggling between extreme mood episodes, she decided to stop working for treatment and self-care. P7's job burnout also led to depression and anxiety, forcing her to take a break from her stressful work in a leading law firm. P10 struggled with panic attacks during sudden episodes of intense anxiety. She could not live a normal life because a panic attack would happen anytime, anywhere. However, only two out of seven who had mental health issues sought professional help. The other five participants practiced self-care by reading psychology books and talking to family and friends.

Lacking the required credential. Credentials represent the jobs and tasks that one is capable of doing. Some decided to give up specific positions due to their lack of the necessary credentials. In other words, some participants quit when they felt they could not do the work. P2 was a K-12 teacher. She resigned from her teaching role because she could not discipline the students. She was quite good at building relationships, but she could not effectively handle students' bad behaviors. Students took advantage of her kindness, and she was frustrated.

Suffering physically. Compared with mental health issues, the women in this study seemed to respond more promptly when physical health problems emerged. For example, P13

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injured her legs and immediately quit her job because she needed to focus on her physical therapy.

Reflecting on Career Decision-Making

I also invited the participants to reflect on their career decisions such as if they felt they made the right decision. I also asked: Do you have regrets? Is there anything you wish you had done differently? Below are their reflections.

P3 recognized that it was difficult to answer whether she made the right decision to opt-out: "The right or wrong (answer) solely depends on what I got from my resignation and the career interruption period. If I finally made a successful career shift, I would say it was a smart decision." P9 admitted that her decision to quit was impulsive. She later realized that there were better ways to solve her problems, but she was immature and impatient. In contrast, P11 wished she had resigned earlier. Her first job was chosen for her by her parents. She felt constrained by her family's expectations. Therefore, she was eager to break free and explore on her own. P15 believed that taking a career break opened up a new world for her. Since graduation from college, she had lived in an environment where people shared similar educational backgrounds and life experiences. "I was living in an information cocoon where there was minimal new knowledge," she said.

The participants' greatest regret was inadequate preparation during the career break for reentry for various reasons including their underestimation of the reentry challenges such as building their skill-set, qualifications, and resume building. P3 always wanted to pursue a Ph.D. degree, but it was impossible without adequate preparation (e.g., maintaining a high college GPA). Some also regretted taking too long to find their passion for a more fulfilling career. For example, P5 said it took her years to find her passion and strengths. When she finally entered the

field, she found that she had to compete with coworkers much younger than her. In addition, her diverse background was perceived, by some people, as not being able to dig deeper into one subject. Another example is P13, who said, "I always shifted from one area to another, without knowing what my next move is." Finally, participants underscored the need to update their industry knowledge. For example, P7 decided to take the civil servant exam offered by the district court because of her parents. However, she did not research the intricates of working in a district court, especially when her past jobs were all in law firms. "There were striking differences between these two systems," which P7 had to learn in a hard way.

Women Availing Themselves of Career Interruptions

The in-depth interviews with the participants revealed that the career interruption period was often structured and consistent. The ways the participants chose to spend their career breaks shared much in common. The 21 women discussed a wide range of activities including (a) getting mental health care (13 participants, 28 references), (b) performing family responsibilities (13 participants, 19 references), (c) receiving educational and vocational training (12 participants, 19 references), (d) working as a freelancer or volunteering (9 participants, 21 references), (e) evaluating financial status (7 participants, 7 references), (f) entertaining themselves (4 participants, 8 references), and (g) getting physical health care (4 participants, 5 references). Below, I discuss each activity separately.

Driven by the internal desire for change and external standards for a hirable employee, the participants were aware of the need for continuous learning. Although some participants were extremely busy during their career interruption because of additional responsibilities (e.g., taking care of a newborn baby or sick family member), they still spent a considerable amount of time learning new skills and professional knowledge on an ongoing basis. Additionally, some choose

to freelance or volunteer to stay active and keep connected to the field. Participants who interrupted their careers due to health problems practiced self-care to get back on track as soon as possible.

Getting Mental Health Care

Thirteen women tried to boost their mental health by reading psychology books, seeking professional help, talking to their family and friends, and finding fun distractions such as travelling. P7's experience was a good example of utilizing a career interruption to practice emotional healing. She had worked in a big law firm in Shanghai, the most populous urban city in China. Working in a competitive environment led to burnout, physical exhaustion, and a diagnosis of depression and anxiety. Her family advised her to take a career break and move to her hometown, Xiamen. Before settling down in Xiamen, P7 decided to try something different. As a volunteer teacher, she went to the so-called Golden Triangle, a hub for drug production and trafficking in southeastern Asia. She described the time spent in the Golden Triangle area as isolated, unique, and rewarding, and a time she would treasure for a lifetime. As a result of this experience, P7 developed a new appreciation for what she had previously taken for granted. For example, in the Golden Triangle, she lived in a shelter with limited access to clean water and electricity. She recalled, "I had to sleep at round 7:00 pm because I didn't have electricity to light my home. I also did not have access to safe drinking water. Then I realized how precious these things are." Her interactions with people from all walks of life were constructive as well:

> From elementary school to college, I spent a lot of time with people who had similar educational backgrounds and life experiences. While volunteering in the Golden Triangle area, I had the chance to meet people coming from distinctive and diverse backgrounds. Some were small business owners such as coffee shop owners; some were freelancers

such as yoga trainers. They did not come from prestigious colleges, nor were they top

experts in their fields. But I learned a lot from their life stories. My conversation with

these people opened my eyes. I became more appreciative of everything I had in my life.

(P7)

The irony is that even though the participants interrupted their careers to heal themselves,

the interruption experience sometimes caused tremendous anxiety. P3 felt lost during her career

break and struggled to find new direction. After her resignation, P4 said that she felt isolated

because she lost all her connections at once. Sometimes she was scared realizing she had to deal

with the hidden risks of unemployment, such as losing health insurance coverage.

Performing family responsibilities

Thirteen participants spent considerable time with their family and friends. P6 said, "I

was pretty busy. There were many friend get-togethers and parties. I had a lot of fun." However,

many of the participants had to fulfill family responsibilities. For eight of the participants, their

primary task was childcare during the career break (i.e., P4, P8, P11, P12, P17, P18, P20, and

P21). The participants had high-demand children, such as newborn babies, toddlers, or children

with special needs. P17 quit her job to take care of her daughter with autism. P20's baby had a

blood problem known as hemolytic disease, so she had to give up her job to keep her baby

company in the hospital. P8 lived in the United States with her husband while having her first

child and had minimal access to external support living far away from her family and friends. At

the same time, her husband was busy with coursework and research. Therefore, she spent much

of her time taking care of her son all by herself.

Other family members also needed attentive care or external support for some

participants. For example, P2 grew up in a family where women are expected to take a

subordinate and sacrificing role. Therefore, she had to fulfill various family responsibilities during her career break. She had a younger brother who chose to study abroad instead of take the national entrance exam. To help her brother, P2 spent much of her time researching overseas programs and finding a college-preparatory school in Russia for him. After that, she moved to her husband's hometown and did household chores every day so her husband could fully focus on his job.

Pursing Educational and Vocational Training

Twelve participants chose to pursue education or vocational training for personal growth and self-improvement during their career break. Specifically, nine women pursued a master's or Ph.D. degree. For example, P4's previous work required constant interaction with international organizations. Thus, to improve her English proficiency, she went to the U.K. for a master's program in mass media. P5 disliked her job in the bank, so she quit and enrolled in a Ph.D. program, majoring in economics. During her four-year-long career interruption for educational purposes, she experienced highs and lows. She published high-quality journal articles through hard work; however, her advisor forced her to postpone her final defense without a good reason. After all the struggles and hardship, she graduated and found an assistant professor position in 2021. The educational career interruption shaped her future career path, which diverged from her original track. Two other participants utilized their career interruption as a blocked time for exam preparation (e.g., K-12 teacher or civil servant entrance exam). For example, P16 had always wanted to be a K-12 teacher, so she spent two years preparing for the K-12 entrance exam and job interviews and became an English teacher for a public middle school. P19 also shared her plan to get a Level 1 Certified Fire Engineer Certificate.

Working

Nine participants reported taking on freelance or volunteer work during their career break. Some of the work helped them stay connected to the field while some were initial attempts in other areas. The drive to work during the career breaks was based on three motives. First, working allowed them to earn money to cover daily expenses. As a single mom, P11 provided English tutoring services to K-12 students during weekends to increase her cash flow. The service fee was pretty good. "It was equal to the salary of a white-collar job," she proudly added. Second, working added credentials and prepared the women for their return to the job market. P14 could not find any full-time position during her career break, so she volunteered in a non-profit organization. The experience of organizing many small-scale fundraising events expanded her skills as an event planner. In addition, she wrote as a columnist for a WeChat official account. Third, working also helped keep their spirits up. P11 told me as a full-time mom, she often wandered aimlessly after dropping her daughter off at school. She needed some work to energize and mobilize her. Through work, she slowly walked away from social isolation and found her life aspirations.

Evaluating Financial Status

Some participants faced financial challenges as a result of the career interruption, which is understandable because taking career breaks means not having a secure income. As P12 said, "In my career break, we had to pay all the bills with my husband's paycheck. We experienced financial stress." However, among the seven participants who disclosed their financial status, only two experienced financial stress. The other five participants had either passive income or external support from their parents and parents-in-law. For example, P10 had annual returns generated from her real-estate investments (she owned two apartments and one shop for lease).

P13 interrupted her career to pursue a Ph.D. degree full-time. During her career break, her parents paid for her tuition and living expenses.

Entertaining Themselves

A career interruption is a period of free time that can have some flexibility. Surprisingly, only four participants mentioned picking up hobbies and having fun during their career interruption. One plausible explanation is that the participants had so much going on in their lives that they were fully occupied. In addition, it wasn't easy to truly relax when the participants struggled with the stigma of a career interruption and reentry challenges. Nevertheless, some participants had the opportunity to revisit their old hobbies, such as traveling and visiting museums. P6 recalled, "I traveled to Xi'an in 2016. It was a great experience visiting all the museums."

Getting Physical Health Care

Four participants used their career breaks to attend to physical health problems such as a leg injury, digestive system problems, and weight control. Two participants noted that the career break was a good time to listen to and take care of their body for optimal health. For example, P7 experienced an increased appetite and decreased physical activity, which are common symptoms of severe depression. After realizing that she had gained a considerable amount of weight, she took a career break to adjust her life, recover from depression, and control her weight. Another example is P13 who injured her legs. Commuting with a foot injury was challenging. In addition, she needed more time for her physical therapy, so she quit her job.

Women Returning to Work

According to the participants, what motivated them to return to work was centering on self-esteem and economic empowerment. First, returning to work was a way to enhance their

self-esteem. During their career interruption, many participants struggled with self-esteem because of their lost connectedness and confidence. P1 recalled:

I felt terrible about myself when I did not work. For example, I could not understand the topic when hanging out with others. The world out there is changing rapidly, but I am living in my bubble. Another thing is that I often tie my self-worth with others' reactions. That bothered me a lot. When I took my baby for a walk, my neighbors asked me when I planned to go back to work—things like that. In China, people cannot recognize the value of being a housewife. They would question you if you choose to stay at home. (P1)

P6 was single, so while not working, she had considerable time for herself, maybe too much to the point she started to feel bored and marginalized. She said, "Everyone else was working. I felt awkward. I started to realize that my job is not only a job. It is a bridge between society and me." Similarly, P12 found that during her career interruption, her sociability decreased significantly. She felt isolated because her life was all about her newborn baby. The women also realized that they could achieve economic empowerment through work. The participants noted that women need to work to earn their right to speak in families and communities. For example, in P7's interaction with the owners of food stands in her neighborhood, she noticed that many people were selling homemade food and snacks in her community. She was concerned that these food stands violated the regulations regarding shared space and food security. As a legal professional working in the local court, she leveraged her resources and connections to investigate this phenomenon and offered suggestions to these food stand owners. She emphasized, "The resources I need to help solve the problems are more accessible through work. Without my job, I can only make several complaints to the HOA. That's it."

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Nevertheless, the reentry process was not free of obstacles for the women. The job application was highly competitive. The Chinese labor market has shifted tremendously in the past decades. P4 was close to 50. In her 20s, she secured her jobs through *guanxi (i.e.,* the personalized social network in China). However, with the rapid diversification and regulation of the Chinese economy, it became nearly impossible to do so in the Chinese labor market. China also has a rapidly changing business and consumer market. As P6 recalled, when she returned to work after taking a one and a half years career break, the market was completely different than before:

> I remember that in 2014, Taobao launched its first Double Eleven Shopping Festival. In around 2017, Alipay (a third-party online payment platform) led to mobile payment evolution. In addition, live-streaming e-commerce transformed into a marketing channel where retailers and influencers sell products. I had to quickly adjust myself to the new market. Before I left, our marketing strategies focused on traditional media such as newspapers and TV channels. Now it is all about Tik Tok and WeChat Official Accounts and Platforms. I also found that I started to have coworkers who are millennials that are much younger than me. Also, as I worked in a foreign business, most of my coworkers had overseas experiences while I did not. It was a steep learning curve, but I grew faster at work. (P6)

Not all participants were satisfied with their current jobs, but all felt lucky and happy about their reentry. P2 shared, "I don't like my current job that much. But still, it is so much better than staying at home." Some of the participants reentered in a new area and fell in love with it. P7, who was once a lawyer in a foreign law firm, reentered a local court. She was sent to the frontline and interacted with various parties involved in multiple lawsuits. These challenges

made her better. She concluded, "Career interruptions could bring you some nice surprises that you had never imagined."

One repeatedly mentioned factor that could help smooth women's reentry process is the intergenerational support from parents or parents-in-law regarding childcare, housework, and financial assistance. P5 concluded that, "Intergenerational support is more important for women than their male counterparts." P13's parents paid for all the tuition fees and living expenses when she pursued her Ph.D. degree. P8, who suffered from career interruption stigma and penalties, said she would take advantage of her parents' support for childcare and no longer interrupt her career. However, not every woman had access to intergenerational support and thus faced more challenges staying in their career track. P11 resigned from her job because neither her parents nor her parents-in-law were available to help care for her newborn baby. As the sole caregiver, P11 quit her job and later found one with a more flexible schedule.

Organizations Not Paying Enough Attention to Returners

Organizations play a vital role in women's career interruption and reentering experiences. However, none of the participants received systematic organizational support as returners. In addition, participants complained about experiencing career interruption bias in the hiring process. P13 had to explain in detail what she did during her career interruptions to the interviewers and still got judged. The HR told her, "As a single woman without kids, there is no need to take a break." Having been questioned about her credentials after years of career breaks, P1 admonished companies to "at least give us the chance to prove ourselves." Some shared how a lack of organizational support and necessary resources could make the reentry even harder. P6 mentioned that she wished she had equal access to the training the company provided to fresh graduates because she reentered into a whole new area. However, she had to figure things out all

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by herself as a returner. This study also revealed that the attitudes about career interruptions differed greatly by industry:

> Different industries have varying levels of tolerance towards interrupted careers. Based on my experience, the education industry has a relatively high tolerance towards broken careers. When I mentioned my career interruption experiences, the interviewers were pretty understanding. (P13)

> I decided to pursue a Ph.D. degree and found a job in college. I found that many industries had a low tolerance towards people with zero experience. I only had experience being a civil servant, which I no longer wanted to pursue further. So, a Ph.D. degree and a position in college is a relatively non-discriminative job for me. People won't judge you regarding your age and years of experience. (P2)

As a female-dominated area, the education field is a relatively safe and friendly environment for career interruptions. The higher tolerance of the education industry is one of the major reasons that seven (P2, P5, P8, P11, P13, P14, P16) participants chose to be educators when they returned to work. Further, childcare experience was perceived as useless in other sectors but was transferrable in the education area. P11 added that the childcare process stimulated her interest in education, which led to a career shift from government work to education in her midlife.

It is worth noting that WeChat businesses, a form of direct selling businesses, provided an onramp to the workplace for returners. Direct selling is "selling products directly to consumers in a non-retail environment" (Lilyquist, 2020, para. 1). A WeChat business is a specific type of direct sale supported by the mobile phone application WeChat. Four interviewed participants made WeChat direct sales: P29 sold essential oils, while P30, P31, and P32 sold

personalized weight control consulting services and products such as vitamins and digital weight scales. According to the participants, the combination of flexibility, low entry, and extensive training sessions made the WeChat business a favorable shelter for women who had lost in their career tracks. As P20 said, "I am an introvert who found selling products very challenging. But I don't have many choices."

Society Creating Barriers for Women's Return

China's social and cultural contexts warrant special attention because the women were heavily constrained by their gender role, societal expectations, and stereotypes (Chiu, 2004). Below are the details of these challenges.

Women Experiencing Stereotypes, Discrimination, and Gender Segregation

All but two participants emphasized that Chinese society holds many gender expectations for women. For example, working within the system (i.e., state-owned businesses) is perceived as ideal for women because of the stable income, a relatively light workload, and flexibility. Although many participants earned much more working in the private sector or foreign businesses, their parents did not think they were on the right career track for their daughters. P2 and P7 described their parents' expectations:

> My parents urged me to go back [to my hometown]. They found me a job in a TV station, a secure position in the system. For them, only the jobs affiliated with state-owned enterprises are acceptable. I can barely argue with them. (P2)
>
> I worked in a different city. My parents preferred me to work in a company closer to their home. They said things like it was not safe for a single woman to live alone. They also suggested I find a less competitive job. According to my parents, being a civil servant is the ideal job in the world. (P7)

From P3's observation, men and women in China might spend career breaks differently due to the different societal expectations. She found that her male coworkers could purely enjoy their career breaks and utilize this period to socialize with friends, but she could not. She often felt ashamed and guilty while relaxing and having fun.

Although it is illegal asking about employees' marital status, the number and ages of children, and maternity plans during interviews, many organizations still ask these questions. According to P5 (married without children), all of her job interviews for banks, universities, or other institutions asked her if she had children. Similarly, P6 and P9 were discriminated against because they were 30-year-old single women who were not married and had no children. The organizations were hesitant to hire P6 because they assumed she might soon get married and get pregnant after hiring her. P3 illuminates the discrimination against women who are childless:

> It was apparent that being unmarried and childless was an obstacle for me. People assumed that I did not need a career break as a single woman. They questioned me like, "if you don't have a family, why do you need to interrupt your career?" I had to explain in detail what I did during my career interruptions. (P3)

Since middle-aged women without children are discriminated against in the labor market, what about married women with children? P8 was a working mom with two children. During the job interview, she felt that she was labeled as someone whose time and energy were consumed by family responsibilities. Under these circumstances, many of the women felt discouraged because they were always wrong, no matter what. It seemed to them that only women in their twenties and single women without children are employable.

Women are also victims of labeling and stereotyping. For example, P5 witnessed discrimination during the hiring process. She saw two candidates competing for a faculty

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position—one male and one female. The male candidate had fewer publications and qualifications. However, the search committee hired the male applicant because they were concerned that women are likely to be emotional and sensitive, thus leading to some mental health problems. They were highly cautious about hiring people with mental health issues because of the risk suicide or self-destruction.

Returners Experiencing Age Discrimination

Chinese women face dual hardships of gender and age discrimination in the workplace. In China, age discrimination does not specifically target the elderly. Young women can also be treated with disfavor. Seven participants, all in their thirties, mentioned that they encountered age discrimination at work. For example, P1 said that in the financial field, many openings set an invisible (not stated in the job postings) age limit of 28. Similarly, P8, a Ph.D. graduate looking for a tenure-track position, said that many national grants in China had an age limit of 35. As a non-traditional Ph.D. student, she was five to six years older than her peers. Therefore, research institutions were hesitant to hire her. P11 planned to pursue a higher degree in her thirties, but her mother discouraged her by reminding her that pursuing education at the wrong age is detrimental. P15 concluded:

> Our society has problematic standards of proper behavior and life choices and enforces
> the standards on everyone. For example, young women would be judged if unmarried in
> their thirties. My parents are very understanding and supportive, but the societal
> environment has caused me much burden and pressure. (P15)

Affirmative Action Causing Negative Effects

Affirmative action, referring to practices or policies favoring certain groups of individuals who have been discriminated against, sometimes causes unintended consequences.

The present study found that affirmative action aimed at supporting women has caused some negative effects. For example, P2 described how female employees were treated favorably, but that there were consequences:

> From my observation, the government system treats its female civil servants favorably. For example, all my female coworkers got off early to pick up their kids. The supervisors were very tolerant and said nothing about it. Therefore, only male employees stayed up late and worked extra hours. Because of that, we could not find enough people to work. In addition, if a woman worked extra hours, she was labeled solitary, masculine, and ambitious. Under this circumstance, I was sometimes judged for working late at night as a married woman with a child. (P2)

As illustrated in P2's story, the organization implemented affirmative action towards women in that they could leave work early without being judged. However, men were expected to regularly work overtime while women were not, which led to negative consequences. For example, women were further stereotyped as caregivers and forced out of the corporate promotion. Additionally, women, such as P2, who intended to stay on track and work extra hours, were considered deviant and transgressing.

P5 also shared her conversation with her Ph.D. advisor, "I was offended when my advisor said things like 'you do not need to work hard as a woman. Just find yourself something easier to do.' He pretended to be considerate and thoughtful, but deep down, he was biased." P8 also shared her experience in academia noting that many grants in China set an age limit for their applicants. The intention was to protect emerging scholars who might not be able to compete with renowned authorities regarding experience, networks, and expertise. However, the

supportive regulations led to age discrimination in the hiring process because institutions wanted to recruit people who would meet the grant application age requirements.

The findings of my study call attention to the complexity of policymaking and leadership styles in supporting women's career advancement. For example, P5's advisor intended to express his concern and support for his female students. However, the unintended consequences could be hidden bias, gender segregation, stereotypes, and discrimination.

Comparing Cultures

Two participants had more than two years of overseas experience, so they had learned the constraints associated with Chinese culture. P1 had a friend while she was in the United States, "She [the friend] had a (employment) gap for two years. But she easily found an internship and went back to work. They didn't see it [the career interruption] as a big problem as we do." P14 also found some cultural differences in how society perceived freelance and part-time jobs. She said that in Britain, being a freelancer is so common that it is a trend among young people. However, she had tremendous difficulty being a freelancer in China because the labor market doesn't recognize part-time experience.

Women Finding Opportunities in Unplanned Events

Many participants interrupted their careers due to external forces such as pregnancy, childcare, and job loss. For them, the career interruption experience heightened the fact that their career trajectories could be easily and suddenly altered, making it difficult to plan ahead. When asked about their future career plans, none of the participants gave a definite answer. Instead, they shared their vision and their willingness to embrace any changes. P1 admitted that she often felt conflicted. She had rejected jobs that lacked growth opportunities, but sometimes, she thought she should put aside her ego and try different things. P7 said that life is too short, and

she wanted to seize the moment and experience as much as possible. Some women found a new direction in life. For example, P2, a previous civil servant, planned to work in academia because devoting time and energy to research brought her a sense of fulfillment. P11 suffered from an unhappy marriage and felt that a decent and satisfying job was the answer. Some were making or considering career shifts. For example, seven participants decided to be educators. In contrast, some planned to excel at their current jobs. P9 wanted to recruit and build up her own sales team. P11 planned to expand her tutoring services to other countries. P12 was thinking about launching a start-up company. P10, P14, and P16 desired to complete specific certifications as a way to move upward.

Women Offering Advice to Peers and Organizations

Reflecting on their career interruptions, the participants offered great advice to individuals interrupting or planning to interrupt their careers. The most important advice was to never give up. P1 said she underestimated the consequences that came with a career interruption, but she always reminded herself to never give up and to find a way back to the workplace. She also advised other women to be mindful of their career decisions, reflect on their career paths, and take responsibility for whatever they choose. P9 suggested that women engage in on-going self-analysis and market research regarding career planning, career value, and career interest. P9 stressed that it is not wise to give up a job based on a short-term evaluation of career prospects; instead, she suggested focusing on a company's or an industry's long-term growth. Another theme was to seek external help and utilize accessible resources. P7 noted that many women were hesitant to reach out because they were isolated from the outside professional world while taking a career break. She recommended that reconnecting with families, friends, mentors, and previous colleagues is an essential step towards a smooth return. The connections could stimulate

the women's interests, rebuild lost confidence, and help discover new opportunities in unexpected places. P7 also suggested reading and exercising since reading helped her stay close to cutting-edge ideas and trends, and regular exercise kept her clear-minded and energetic. Other participants suggested acquiring and improving their skills through education and self-directed learning. P11 recounted a girlfriend who stayed at home for years. Later, the family's financial crisis forced her to seek work. Fortunately, she had subscribed to photography courses and learned to be a professional photographer during her career break. Now she is moving steadily towards her new career as a photographer.

Participants complained that the organizations did not provide sufficient support, such as removing bias from the hiring process. P1 admonished companies to "at least give us the chance to prove ourselves." Participants also recommended that companies provide ongoing training and mentorship to newcomers. P6 mentioned that when she returned to the workplace, the company did not treat her as a newbie because she had years of industry experience, even though her accumulated work experience was in a completely different field. She wished she could have had equal access to the training the company provided to fresh graduates. Another piece of advice was to establish specific reentering paths for returners. P11 pinpointed that the assistance and support from organizations could help significantly reduce the reentry barriers for women and, more importantly, help them feel valued and motivated.

Many of the participants' experiences highlight that at the national and societal levels, changes need to be made. Unfair labor practices by employers are still pervasive. Without powerful oversight, some organizations could even violate labor laws. P13 gave an example of maternal leave. According to national legislation, women should be able to take a six-month maternity leave. However, some organizations she knew violated the law and only allowed a

three-month maternity leave. According to P13, women's career advancement called for joint efforts from various entities including the government legislation, company policies, and leadership's attitudes.

Summary

This chapter presents the major findings of the present study. First, I describe 21 participants' backgrounds, career paths, and previous work experience. Their stories and advice help us understand their career choices, struggles, challenges, and opportunities. This chapter also presents a general picture of Chinese career women's integration of work and life. This chapter also presents and synthesizes the participants' definitions of career interruptions. These definitions and perceptions add new dimensions to the commonly accepted definition of career interruptions that are documented in the existing literature. Specifically, I present nine categories and 43 subcategories that emerged from the data analysis. The participants' life stories and in-depth reflections provide a richer understanding of women's career interruptions in China. I cite their stories to explain and elucidate the categories and subcategories.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aimed to explore women's career interruption experiences in urban China. Through intensive one-on-one interviews, I explored 21 Chinese women's perceptions of their career interruptions, and the strategies they adopted to navigate their career interruptions. Three research questions guided the study:

1. What are Chinese women's career interruption experiences in urban China?

2. What are Chinese women's perceptions of their career interruptions?

3. What strategies could help Chinese women return to work?

In Chapter V, I first synthesize the findings related to the three research questions. Second, I discuss women's career interruption experiences in the Chinese context and in relation to existing literature. I then derive implications for research and practice, followed by the conclusion.

Summary of Findings

The first research question explored women's career interruption experiences in urban China. The findings indicate that there is no easy answer or consistent reason why women choose to interrupt their careers at certain life stages. The data analysis reviewed a wide range of external factors that influenced the participants' decisions including family reasons, organizational culture, leadership styles, relocation, salary and benefits, labor market trends, career prospects, job loss, and commuting costs. In addition, the participants' decisions to take a career break were driven by internal factors such as their career values, career interests, mental health, individual credentials, and physical health condition. When they decided to return to the workplace, the participants encountered numerous challenges, such as a competitive job

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application process, a rapidly shifting business and consumer market, and domestic responsibilities (e.g., childcare). Despite these difficulties, the women in this study also acknowledged many unexpected "silver linings" as a result of their career interruptions. Several participants described how their career interruption offered opportunities for renewed health, deep self-reflection, career shifts, health care, and recharged energy.

The second research question focuses on understanding the women's feelings and thoughts regarding their career interruptions. Findings from my study show that opportunities and challenges coexist for individuals with interrupted careers. Eleven participants were happy about their decision to take a break from their careers, and all 21 participants felt fulfilled and grateful about their return. Nevertheless, the participants identified many things they wished they had done differently. For example, P5 wished she had found her true calling earlier in life. She felt she had wasted too much time receiving education and training in a field about which she was not genuinely passionate. P7 realized that she was not well prepared when pursuing work in a different field after re-entering the job market. She wished she had researched more about the institution in which she chose to work. The participants also provided some fresh insights on career interruptions. For example, P15 considered it a good sign that many people had experienced interrupted careers because it means they have more career choices than their parents and grandparents. According to P15, the coexistence of different career paths indicates a dynamic and vibrant labor market.

The third research question aims to discover the strategies that facilitate the reentry process. The participants identified a number of strategies based on their personal experiences including (a) being persistent and never giving up; (b) reflecting on one's career paths and looking forward; (c) proactively seeking external help and leveraging accessible resources; and

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(d) taking advantage of the career interruption period to develop and improve professional skills. In addition to sharing their strategies, the participants also provided valuable advice about the career decision-making process based on their self-reflections. For example, P6 stated that it took time to practice self-reflection and find her passion for a more fulfilling career. P8 noted that career decisions were situational. If she were placed in different situations or contexts, the career choices would be quite different. Therefore, she advised that we should never regret yesterday because we made the best decision based on the knowledge, experiences, and resources available at the moment. Figure 5 illustrates the key findings of the three research questions that guided this study.

Grounded theorists utilize storylines to integrate major categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Ducy & Stough, 2018). Below is the storyline that integrates the nine categories presented in Chapter IV. Many *women working in China* experienced career interruptions for one or more years. Those *women made career choices* of opting-in and opting-out due to multiple factors, such as a shift of career interest or family responsibilities. During career interruptions, *women availed themselves of this period* to pursue vocational training, take care of their families, practice self-care, entertain themselves, and freelance. While *reentering to work*, *women received little support from organizations*. Additionally, *society created multiple barriers for women's return*, such as reinforcing gendered expectations. Those who successfully reentered the workplace were able to *find opportunities in unplanned events*. While reflecting on the career interruption experiences, these returners found that *their perceptions of career interruptions depart from society's traditional mindset* that defines them as detrimental and unproductive. They see career interruption as a challenging yet valuable pause in their life journeys. Despite their overall experiences of experiencing career interruptions as being positive and even

rewarding, *they advised that more needed to be done* to strategically navigate a career interruption and get the most out of it.

Figure 5 also suggests that the status of *working* and *taking a career break* could form a dynamic cyclic motion. P17, a previous market specialist for an eCommerce company, took her first career break to be with her son. One year later, she reentered into a start-up company and stayed there for 13 years until she gave birth to her daughter. Later, she took a second career break to support her daughter with special needs. After a year-long break, she reentered into an educational institution. She worked there for five years and opted out again to pursue a career shift. P17's career went through a cyclic motion of job—career interruption—job—career interruption—job—career interruption. The end of each career role indicates the start of another career life cycle. This is aligned with the Proposition 4 proposed in Chapter II, stating that career interruptions are integral parts of individuals' career path. In the fluid process, career breaks are not only outcomes of previous career choices but also antecedents of the upcoming career opportunities. Therefore, career interruption is not a disconnection between two phases. Instead, it is an inherent stage embraced by a non-stop cyclic motion, which is emblematic of a Taoist worldview.
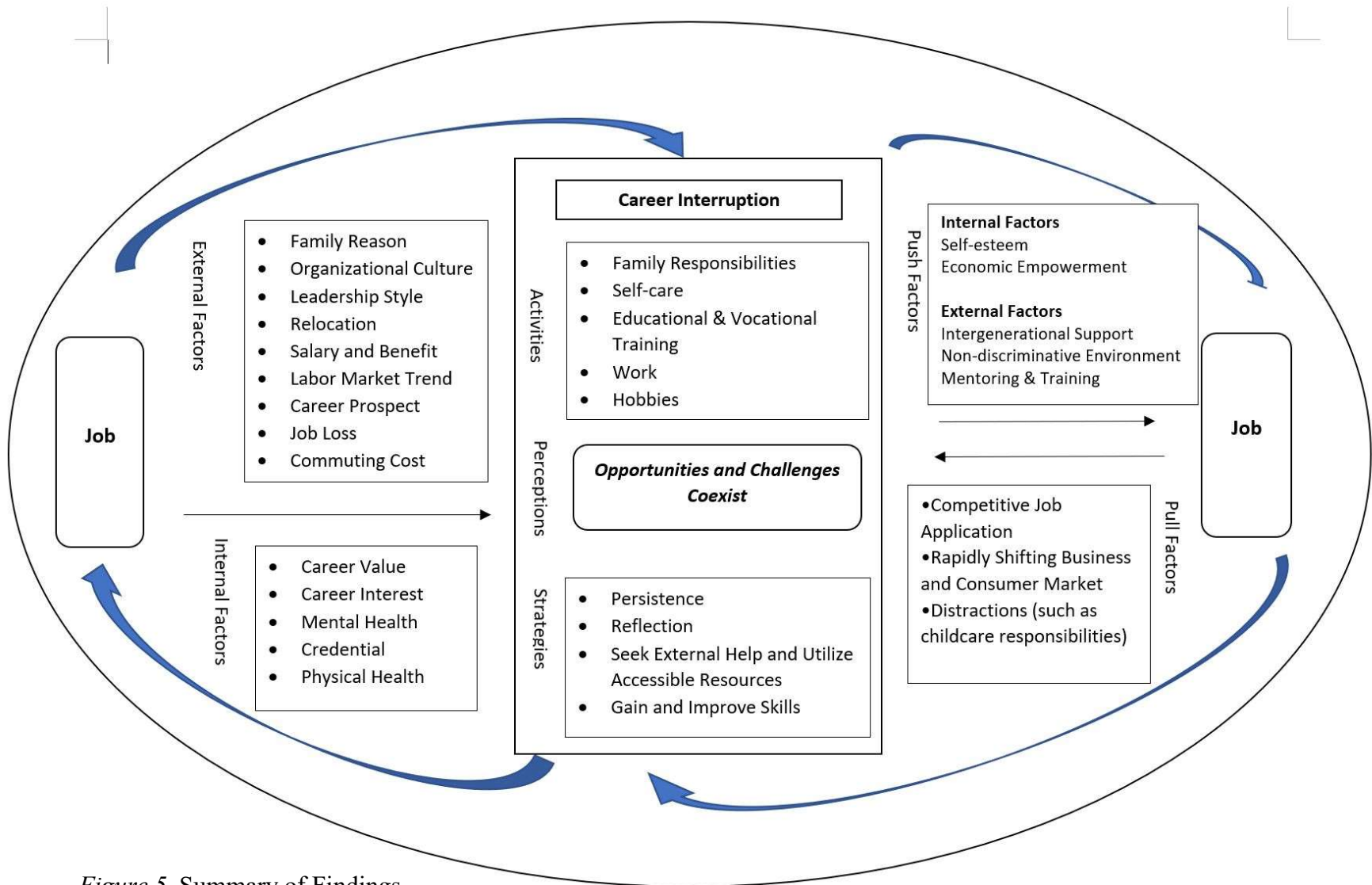
Figure 5. Summary of Findings

Discussion

In this section, I critically examined female returners' challenges in China, including their struggles with the career decision-making process, lack of social and organizational support, and the absence of tailored career counseling services. The discussion draws heavily on literature and published statistics, supplemented by the life experiences shared by the participants in this study. In addition, I draw on the collected data and refine the four Taoism propositions developed in Chapter II with real-life examples. Lastly, in response to the identified challenges, I present an integrated model of interventions for the interrupted careers that includes counseling services, organizational efforts, social support, and individual responses (COSI). The COSI model integrates the conceptualization (the Taoism perspective developed in Chapter II) and empirical findings of this project (findings presented in Chapter IV).

The Fortress Besieged (围城) Phenomenon—Struggle to Decide between Two Choices

A famous Chinese writer, Qian Zhongshu (1947), wrote a satirical novel titled *Fortress Besieged*. The title came from a French proverb: marriage is like a fortress besieged: those who are outside want to get in, and those who are inside want to get out. Later on, the expression *fortress besieged* was expanded to include working within and outside the system. In China, working within the system refers to working in state-owned enterprises such as the local government; and working outside the system means working in private or foreign businesses. The career decision of working inside or outside the system is a trade-off between opportunities and stability (Dong & Xu, 2008; Liu et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2014). In this sense, the fortress besieged has been used to describe how people working within the system want to get out because of the opportunities and monetary incentives outside. On the other hand, employees working outside the system long for the stability and security provided by working within the

system. The present study found that the participants struggled to decide between these two choices. However, there was a noticeable move from outside to within the system among participants in their 30s. Nine of the 21 women in this study had experience working both inside and outside the system. Among them, six made a career shift in their 30s from outside (the competitive, well-compensated jobs in private and foreign companies) to inside the system (less pay but more stable jobs in government enterprises). The career shift is analyzed below.

Hiding within the System during the Economic Downturn

The career shift from outside to inside the system has been driven by the economic downturn. Scholars have indicated that individuals' career choices are subject to their socioeconomic context (Callanan et al., 2017; Lent and Brown, 2020; Xu & Tracey, 2014). On May 15, 2021, *The Economist* published an article, *Why More Young Chinese Want to Be Civil Servants*, which indicated that many Chinese people chose secure jobs such as civil servant jobs instead of well-paid jobs such as working for technology giants. This choice reflected the individual's desire for job security in the turbulent and volatile economy, which was compounded by the global COVID-19 pandemic. One of the participants (P10) explained that, "a hard winter looms, and it is better to hide within the system."

Seeking Job Security Upon Return

Studies have found that women choose gendered (e.g., care-oriented professions) and less prestigious occupations after taking a career break (Görlich & De Gript, 2009; Lovejoy and Stone, 2012; Malo & Muñoz-Bullón, 2008; Shaw et al., 1999). In the present study, women took career breaks from organizations such as a leading law firm and a foreign-invested company and the reentered the workforce in a state-owned enterprise in their 30s. The motive behind these women taking a downward path upon reentry is two-fold: balancing life and work and avoiding

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severe wage penalties (Malo & Muñoz-Bullón, 2008). However, in the present study, participants indicated that they were most attracted to the job security provided by within-the-system occupations as the primary reason for their career shift. Job security, "a psychological state in which workers vary in their expectations of future job continuity within an organization" (Kraimer et al., 2005, p. 390), has been found to positively affect employees' job satisfaction (Ouyang et al., 2015). In China, the expectations of job continuity in an organization have long been described as "iron rice bowls" (Dong & Xu, 2008; Wang et al., 2014). The career shift from outside to within the system reflects the participants' inner desire for continuity, security, and stability at certain life stages. In addition, the feedback that they received from family members also reinforce these decisions.

Making Gendered Career Choices under Parental Influence

For Chinese women, the career choice of working inside or outside of the system was heavily shaped by their parents' gender expectations. Studies have found that Chinese parents, influenced by Confucian philosophy, are more likely to emphasize the parent-child hierarchy and use authoritarian parenting (Su & Hynie, 2011; Xie & Li, 2019). Chao (2000) proposed the term *training* or *chiao shun* (教训) to represent Chinese parents' way of showing love through discipline and governing. Given this context, Liu et al. (2015) found that children accept career gender role stereotyping under their Chinese parents' influence. For example, girls are taught not to take high-risk masculine jobs such as firefighters. The parental influence on career choices persists when children grow up (Wong & Liu, 2010). In the present study, several women were advised into less intense and more stable occupations by their parents. Three participants (P2, P4, and P11) emphasized that their parents persuaded them to work for state-owned enterprises. For example, the parents of P8 and P16 strongly objected when the women resigned from within-the-

system jobs. Other participants (P7, P8, and P15) recalled that their parents advised them to accept jobs near their home. By and large, the parents' gendered educational and career expectations reinforced gender stereotypes and interfered with the women's career decisions (Liu, 2006).

Breaking Down the Misconceptions with Truth—We Did Not Opt Out Just for Kids

Summers et al. (2014) talked about the wrong message sent by magazines (e.g., Eve Magazine from the U.K.) that women opt out of the workplace solely for childcare. The message warrants special attention because it could further reinforce the embedded stereotype about women's gendered roles. In addition, it could send negative signals to employers that women are less committed to work because they are always children-centered. In a similar vein, Boushey (2008) identified a decrease in the "child effect" on women's employment. The present study also found that the participants' decisions were driven by multiple factors, among which childcare was not the most important consideration.

Research has also shown that many other reasons can explain why women take career breaks, such as a shift in their career focus (Cabrera, 2007), pursuit of authenticity (Anding, 2011), and gendered organizational culture (Bastalich et al., 2007; GarcÍa-Manglano, 2015; Landivar, 2014; Panteli, 2006). Patton and McMahon (1999) heightened the need to focus on patterns and structures rather than a reductionistic pursuit of causes while examining individuals' career decision-making process. The collected data suggested that the participants' career decisions were driven by three elements: chance events (Rojewski, 1999), contingency factors (Bright et al., 2005), and contexts (Lent & Brown, 2020). Based on the participants' narratives, these elements function as an organic whole through decision strategies, which "describe how information on attributes and preferences is combined in order to select an alternative"

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(Sauermann, 2005, p. 280). The chance events refer to "unplanned, accidental or otherwise situational, unpredictable, or unintentional events or encounters that have an impact on career development and behavior" (Rojewski, 1999, p. 269). In the present study, getting pregnant, taking care of children or a sick family member, and suffering from physical or mental illnesses were typical chance events. Due to the prompt nature of chance events, they are often mistakenly perceived as the determining factor leading to women's career interruptions. However, some participants emphasized that chance events only trigger what they had already decided. P1's situation helps us better understand the interactive relationship between fundamental factors and chance events in women's career decision-making process. P1 quit her job and moved to the United States with her husband. In her case, the relocation of her husband was a chance event that required a prompt response regarding whether she would quit her job and follow her husband to a different country. However, the fundamental reason that led to her resignation was her discontent with her previous job. The employer made empty promises in the hiring process and subsequently drained P1's mental energy. Therefore, long before her husband decided to study abroad, P1 had been planning to leave.

Contingency factors, referring to the "awareness of skills and abilities" (Bright et al., 2005, p. 562), were also found to affect the women's career decisions. For example, P1 realized that her credentials could not compete with her peers in the United States, so she decided to return to China and find a job.

In the career development literature, contexts broadly include "key environmental features that can aid or impede choice-making and implementation" (Lent & Brown, 2020, p. 6). Specifically, contexts could be "cultural, familial, institutional/structural, economic factors linked to the choice-making generally or to particular choice options" (Lent & Brown, 2020, p.

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6). In the present study, the context factor played a fundamental role in P1's resignation because the unfair treatment she encountered at work pushed her to quit. P1's story exemplifies individuals' decision strategies in that they weigh and evaluate the factors described above and make the final decisions.

Being Invisible in the Crowd—We are Forgotten as Skilled Workers

The present study aimed to explore strategies initiated by society, organizations, and individuals that could help promote women's return to the workplace. All of the 21 women were discouraged about the nearly absent social and organizational support before and after their return to the workplace.

In China, vocational and educational training comes from three primary sources: the government and public institutions, vocational education and training institutions, and organizations (Cooke, 2005). None of these sources provided specific training for the returners in this study. The Chinese government and public institutions have strived to train more qualified individuals who are able to improve and expand vocational education (Shan et al., 2015). For example, on October 12, 2021, the Chinese government released a guideline titled *Opinion about Promoting the High-quality Development of Modern Vocational Education*. The guideline reflected the country's determination to support vocational education and cultivate more qualified professionals. However, participants in the present study were skilled and well-educated career women; thus, they were excluded from further vocational education provided by the government and public institutions including vocational schools and technical colleges (Cooke, 2005). The vocational schools focus on training middle school graduates (Li, 2021); and technical colleges recruit students who want to "specialize in qualifications such as nursing" (Cooke, 2005, p. 30). Organizations focus on management training or employee training at the

enterprise level (Cooke, 2005; Sharma, 2021). Thus, women with interrupted careers are missing out on the training network.

Globally, organizations could play an active role in assisting returners. For example, Facebook established a reentering program named *Return to Work*, a 16-week immersive program that provides mentorship and training to those with two or more years of career interruptions. Similarly, Amazon started the *Amazon Returnship Program*. Other companies like Grubhub, Spectrum, Intel, Heap, Linkedln, Honeywell, Ford, and General Motors have similar programs. Governments have also initiated and extended systematic campaigns to attract skilled workers back to work. For example, between 2005 and 2011, the U.K. government launched the *Return Campaign* to support women scientists, engineers, and technologists' return to work (Herman, 2011). Grissom and Reininger (2012) also cautioned policymakers to pay attention to reentrants as they are "an important source of teacher labor supply" (p. 425). However, participants from the present study lacked resources and even reported experiencing age discrimination and gendered expectations upon return.

Choosing a *Let Be* Attitude—Self Treat Psychological Disorders

The participants reported experiencing anxiety and stress during the career interruption period. According to the participants, those who planned for a break felt stressed about taking responsibility for their actions (P5, P16, and P21). Unplanned and non-predictable career interruptions such as experiencing job loss can make people even more anxious because it is a type of career shock, referring to "a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career" (Akkermans, Seibert, & Mol, 2018, p. 4). The negative

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career shock is often associated with physical symptoms of stress and spillover (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020).

When career interruptions occur, different mindsets yield dissimilar outcomes. Gati and Vulcsár (2021) pointed out that individuals who view the transition as unfavorable are likely to fail to cope with the challenges. In contrast, those who view it as an opportunity for change could reap positive work outcomes.

Rooted in robust research of vocational, cognitive, and behavior psychology, career services can help individuals adjust their mindset and prepare for change (Lent & Brown, 2020). However, in the present study, only two participants sought professional help for mental health issues. One plausible explanation is Chinese society's deeply-rooted stigma and bias associated with mental health issues (Xu, Li, Zhang, & Wang, 2017), making people hesitant to seek external help. The present study revealed, to some degree, the challenges of introducing career counseling services to individuals with career interruption experiences in the Chinese context. When asked about their coping strategies with mental illness such as anxiety and depression, the participants talked about reading psychology books, talking to family and friends, and looking for a pleasant distraction. The women in this study believed that mental illness was curable without any professional interventions, thus adopted a *let be* attitude.

Comparing the Taoism Propositions with Real-Life Examples

The 21 participants' life stories and their deep reflections provide evidence-based insights into the four Taoism propositions developed in Chapter II. In general, their experiences and reflections serve as real-life examples of how these propositions manifest themselves in individuals' career lives. Below, I compare the propositions with the collected data.

Proposition 1. A career break itself is neutral. It is how to manage career interruptions that might lead to constructive or destructive career outcomes.

Proposition 2. The simplicity and vacancy of career breaks, just like the Taoism conception of *Wu*, harbor within itself all potentialities.

Proposition 1 and 2 emphasize that career interruption is a common career stage that is potentially constructive. The participants' reflections about their career interruption experiences reveal the positive side of career interruptions, which is basically ignored in the existing literature. In Chapter II, I proposed that the potentialities of career breaks include but are not limited to (a) a change in one's field (such as profession, occupational field, or specialty); (b) a change in one's skillset (such as the accumulation of new skills or advancement of preexisting skills); (c) a change in goals and expectations (such as salary, position, title, self-image, and self-fulfillment) (d) a change in one's environment (such as co-workers and team, organizations and countries); or (e) a change in one's mental model and paradigm (such as values, motivation, and satisfaction). Below, I use P7's experiences as an example to explain these potentialities.

P7 had worked in a big law firm in Shanghai, the most populous urban city in China. Working in a competitive environment led to burnout, physical exhaustion, and a diagnosis of depression and anxiety. Her family advised her to take a career break and move to her hometown, Xiamen. Before settling down in Xiamen, P7 went to the so-called Golden Triangle (a hub for drug production and trafficking in southeastern Asia) as a volunteer teacher. She described the time spent in the Golden Triangle area as isolated, unique, and rewarding, and a time she would treasure for a lifetime. As a result of this experience, P7 developed a new appreciation for what she had previously taken for granted (*a change in one's mental model and paradigm*). She decided to pursue a different career path. Instead of working in a foreign law

firm, P7 chose to work in a local judicial court near home (*a change in goals and expectations*). She spent one more year preparing for the civil servant exam (*a change in one's skillset*) and finally reentered as a judge assistant (*a change in one's environment*).

The participants also added that, from a broader perspective, it is a good sign that many people had experienced interrupted careers because it meant they had more career choices than their parents and grandparents (P15). According to P15, the coexistence of different career paths indicates a dynamic and vibrant labor market.

Proposition 3. Wu-wei (i.e., strategic non-action), often seen during the interruption period, is an essential part of one's well-being and self-growth.

Most participants' attitudes and strategies are aligned with the Taoism *let be* attitude and *Wu-Wei* strategic non-action. Taoism suggests approaching the system we live in through active imagination, intuition, and meaning-making, and eventually developing action through inaction (Coward, 1985). Similarly, most participants waited positively and patiently for changes to happen.

In the present study, 13 out of 21 participants used strategic non-action in at least one of their career interruptions, which means they said things like "I just wait for changes to happen" or "I decided to wait and see." Individuals choose strategic non-action for various reasons. P7 holds a positive mindset, saying that "life will bring you surprises you have never expected before." In contrast, P11 decided to wait and see because, based on her life experiences, she found that "changes always outrun your plan." This, again, is indicative of a Taoist view, in that change is a given in the universe, and emphasizes the Wu-Wei principle.

In addition, seven out of 21 participants experienced psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, and panic attack. However, only two sought professional help. The other

participants relied on self-treat in coping with mental health issues. Rather than overpower and change the status-quo, the participants decided to choose a *let be* attitude and find the way out through meaning-making. Their strategies for meaning-making included reading psychology books, finding pleasant distractions, and talking to family and friends.

Proposition 4. Instead of a breaking point in a linear path, career interruptions can be viewed as an integral component of a cyclic motion.

The participants' career lives indicate that the status of *working* and *taking a career break* could form a dynamic cyclic motion. P17, a previous market specialist for an eCommerce company, took her first career break to be with her son. One year later, she reentered into a start-up company and stayed there for 13 years until she gave birth to her daughter. Later, she took a second career break to support her daughter with special needs. After a year-long break, she reentered into an educational institution. She worked there for five years and opted out again to pursue a career shift. This is almost emblematic of a career having seasons, as do our lives, which seems more rhythmic and nature. P14 also has complicated career paths. She worked as a communication specialist for three years. Then she gapped for one year and three months and reentered the public relations field. One year later, she took an educational leave and went to Britain for a Master's degree in Marketing. After graduation, she freelanced and sought opportunities to return to work. It took her two years until she found another job: working as a staff in a top ten university in China. These participants' careers went through a cyclic motion of job—career interruption—job—career interruption. The end of each career role indicates the start of another career life cycle. In the fluid process, career breaks are not only outcomes of previous career choices but also antecedents of the upcoming career incidents. Therefore, career

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interruption is not a disconnection between two phases. Instead, it is an inherent stage embraced by a non-stop cyclic motion.

It is worth noting that the Taoism *let be* attitude and strategic non-action cannot fully represent the participants' career experiences. First, instead of waiting for changes to happen, some participants engaged in exploratory activities and sought positive changes by acquiring new skills and professional certificates. For example, P2 and P5 took an educational leave to pursue a Ph.D. degree. In so doing, they wanted to empower themselves and reach financial independence. Second, individuals' responses to career interruptions may change over time. For instance, P1 was highly proactive during her first career interruption period. She got admitted to a master's program in the United States and started her education in Finance. However, her second career interruption was occupied with unanticipated challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, travel restrictions, competitive job market, and carrying a second child. Instead of actively seeking change, she chose to "just wait and see what happens."

COSI: Toward an Integrative Model of Interventions for Interrupted Careers

Based on a synthesis of the relevant literature and collected data of the present study, I propose an integrated model of intervention consisting of four aspects: counseling services, organizational efforts, social support, and individual responses (COSI, see Table 13). The content draws on the participants' experience and advice, supplemented by relevant studies in the career development literature. In this section, I further discuss counseling services, organizational efforts, and social support because these three aspects are found to be severely inadequate based on the participants' life stories and reflections.

Table 13

COSI: Toward an Integrative Model of Interventions for Interrupted Careers

Component	Corresponding Interventions
Counseling Services	• Borrow experience from career transition counseling • Introduce a Taoism perspective to help cope with career interruptions
Organizational Efforts	• Remove bias and discrimination in the hiring process • Take a closer look at the affirmative action towards women • Encourage flexibility • Build reentering programs
Social Support	• Promote equitable access to quality childcare • Design and deliver high-level vocational training for skilled workers • Build onramps and leveraging resources for returners • Regulate labor markets and penalize misconduct such as asking illegal interview questions
Individual Responses	• Embrace lifelong learning (e.g., pursue educational and vocational training) • Self-directed learning to acquire and improve skills • Update industry knowledge • Do not underestimate the challenges and never give up • Engage in on-going self-analysis (e.g., reflect on career paths and be mindful of career decisions) • Research the market • Leverage accessible resources (e.g., reconnect with families, friends, mentors, and previous colleagues) • Practice mental and physical health care (e.g., read and exercise)

Counseling Services

In the career counseling literature, career interruptions have long been treated as a type of career transition (Gati & Kulcsár, 2021; Greenhaus et al., 2010; Sauermann, 2005). Therefore, synthesized strategies from career transition counseling literature are transferrable to career interruptions counseling. The present study takes it one step further by introducing Taoism into

the counseling services to help bring the ontological aspects of career interruptions into a sharper focus. Below are the details of the career counseling services.

Borrow Experience from Career Transition Counseling

Scholars have introduced multiple counseling strategies to prepare individuals for the increasing frequency of career transitions in today's job market. For example, career theories such as happenstance theory (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999) and career construction theory (Savickas, 2004, 2013) suggest that career counselors and individuals approach unanticipated events more positively and proactively. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (1999) encouraged individuals to engage in exploratory activities so unplanned events can turn into learning opportunities. In the present study, their argument was supported by participants who use their career interruptions to acquire new skills and professional certificates. Pryor and Bright (2003) proposed chaos career theory, which applies "the idea of complex dynamical systems to individuals seeking to develop careers and to the contexts in which such development occurs" (Pryor & Bright, 2014, p. 5). According to chaos career theory, individuals are encouraged to reflect upon the complex influences on their career decision-making process (McKay, Bright, & Pryor, 2005). In a similar vein, participants in the present study reflected on their career decision-making and found that their decisions were driven by a combination of internal and external factors. Some studies have suggested promoting individuals' autonomy and confidence to respond to career transitions (Savickas, 2005; Stoltz & Young, 2012; Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2011). To achieve this goal, Stoltz and Young (2012) devised a motivational interviewing approach to help clients adjust to change and make autonomous decisions. Their approach consists of seven counseling processes: "establishing the therapeutic relationship, client assessment, developing discrepancies, rolling with resistance, addressing client self-efficacy,

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establishing empathy, and transition/termination" (p. 329). To sum up, the theories and corresponding strategies have provided a possible solution by perceiving individuals as active interveners. Other authors have suggested gender-specific strategies. For example, Motulsky (2005) drew on a feminist relational paradigm in examining women's career transitions and addressed that the counselors should be more cognizant of relational influences (e.g., connections and disconnections with family members) in women's career transitions. The present study lent support to Motulsky's (2005) argument, finding that Chinese women made gendered career choices under parental influence. Ronzio (2012) chose the developmental perspective and added that counselors also need to be mindful of contextual stressors such as financial stability.

Introduce the Taoism Perspective

The strategies mentioned above were framed within the western mindset, emphasizing raising consciousness and empowering individuals' ability to interfere instead of letting psychic processes unfold naturally (Coward, 1985). Findings from this study revealed the fact that Chinese women often adopt a *let be* attitude in dealing with mental health issues instead of seeking for professional guidance. The advantage of introducing the Taoism perspective is to introduce a new way of meaning-making, aligned with the participants' let be attitude, in coping with the mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, and panic attack) reported by the participants. Renowned theorists such as Carl Rogers, Carl Gustav Jung, and Abraham Maslow rejected western therapy by introducing Taoism into western therapy practices to reduce psychological intensity (Maslow, 1966, 1979; Rogers, 1973; Wilhelm & Jung, 1931). Beginning in the 1980s, there was a divide among western therapists between pragmatic and aesthetic approaches. The pragmatic therapists perceive themselves as active interveners while the

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aesthetic therapists take the appreciator stance and choose the *let be* attitude (Jordan, 1985). For example, Jordan (1985) introduced a similar concept of paradoxical interventions, which means accepting or even encouraging a system's functioning as it is. Influenced by Jordan's (1985) interpretation of Taoism, O'Byrne (1990) further concluded that the best way to tackle a non-change position is to go with the rigidity and "activate the system's own returning responses" (p. 34). However, these scholars' ingenious expansion of western methods was largely neglected in the career counseling field. In the present study, I suggest introducing the Taoism *let be* attitude and strategic non-action to help individuals navigate their career interruption period. According to Jordan (1985), Taoism suggests that "the persistence of the attempted solution is the source of rigidity in the system" (p. 3). The Taoism principles warn of the potential risks of a persistent push for change, especially when the situation has reached the point of rigidity and no change. Rather than overpower and change the status-quo, Taoism suggests approaching the system we live in through active imagination, intuition, and meaning-making, and eventually developing action through inaction (Coward, 1985). Therefore, it is constructive in coping with psychological and attitude issues (e.g., anxiety) related to career break experiences (Moss & Perryman, 2012).

There are many ways to apply Taoism principles to career counseling practices. One application is the noninterfering strategy, from the concept of *wu-wei*. The affirmation of non-action is absent in the career interruption literature and in career counseling practices, but it has proven to be a well-established strategy in family interventions and therapy (Jordan, 1985; O'Byrne, 1990). Noninterfering counseling can be instrumental. For example, when clients struggle with psychological intensity in their career interruption period, the therapist could encourage them to wait positively and patiently for changes to happen. While communicating

with the client, the therapist is expected to demonstrate the characteristics of a successful Taoism leader who "people barely know that he exists" (Rogers, 1973, p. 110). Another way to utilize Taoism strategies is to introduce a cyclic view of time to the clients, who may feel stuck and disconnected in the career interruption period. A cyclic view of time removes rigidity by redefining the career break as an integral component of the returning process. In the Taoism philosophy, whenever an extreme is reached, a reversal occurs. Therefore, the career interruption can be perceived as the opportunity to embark on a new journey and restart a new career life cycle.

Organizational Efforts

Organization behavior scholars have examined employee-organization relations for decades. Studies have found that there is a reciprocity norm in organizations (Gouldner, 1960) based on the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). That is, employees are likely to reciprocate below-level inducements by lowering work performance and decreasing workplace morale (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior) (Ang, Van Dyne, & Begley, 2003). In the present study, participants reported age discrimination, gender segregation, and even illegal practices they witnessed or experienced in different organizations. Furthermore, organizational support was nearly absent in women's struggle to return. However, several efforts could be initiated at the organizational/enterprise level to support current and potential employees.

Removing Bias and Discrimination in the Hiring Process

The gendered organizational culture, discrimination, and bias have been repeatedly proven to discourage current employees (Goldenhar, Swanson, Hurrell, Ruder, & Deddens, 1998; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997) and returners (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Mavriplis et al., 2010). In the present study, participants shared their experiences of being discriminated

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against in job interviews for various reasons: older than 28, close to 35, not married, childless, married without children, married with children, and the list goes on. P1 admonished companies to "at least give us the chance to prove ourselves." Shaffer and her coauthors (2000) proposed a concept of gender evaluation through "the use of gender as a criterion for employment decisions" (p. 396). They found that gender evaluation is an essential indicator of adverse job-related outcomes such as low job satisfaction and high turnover intentions. P14's supervisor, drawing from her decades of industry experience, concluded that women with children value their jobs more and are more committed to their work. Her claim echoes Chiu and Ng's (1999) study on women-friendly policies, stating that organizations adopting women-friendly policies could benefit from women's affective commitment in return. To remove bias and discrimination in the hiring process, Shaffer et al. (2000) suggested introducing training sessions to help managers learn the adverse outcomes of gender evaluations in the context of current legislation.

Taking A Closer Look at Affirmative Action towards Women

Affirmative action, referring to the practice or policies aimed at supporting those who are often discriminated against, was once "a descendent of the movement to secure the civil rights of blacks" (Leonard, 1989, p. 62). Later, it embraced additional disadvantaged groups such as working women (Moscoso & GarcÍa-Izquierdo, 2012). In the present study, affirmative action takes a more subtle form. Instead of systematic and regulatory efforts, the affirmative action the women experienced was implicit preferential treatment. According to the participants, affirmative action could be seemingly supportive policies, regulations, or norms but they could lead to adverse outcomes. For example, in P2's organization, women were allowed to leave early to pick up their children. The consequence was that women who refused to use the privilege and leave early were judged for making their peers who left look bad and they were labeled as

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(overly) ambitious. At the same time, the challenging tasks requiring extra hours were often assigned to male employees to "support" women for their family-related early release. Women were also considered less for promotion opportunities to "help" them balance work and life. This finding does not necessarily negate the positive effects of these supportive policies, but instead, it serves as a reminder for organizational leaders and policymakers that it is crucial to combat deeply rooted gender stereotypes and to be cautious about the bias hidden in those seemingly supportive ideas, policies, and norms.

Promoting Flexibility

Workplace flexibility is "the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks" (Hill, Grzywacz, Allen, Blanchard, Matz-Costa, Shulkin, & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2008, p. 152) and is perceived as "a potential remedy for work-life conflicts" (Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2013, p. 413). Over half (12) of the participants had one or more children, and they said that workplace flexibility was a crucial enabler for their return. However, none of the participants saw or experienced the organizations making systematic efforts to encourage flexibility.

Organizations can also benefit from promoting workplace flexibility. The literature suggests that increased flexibility could help enhance employee commitment and improve the organization's overall reputation (Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa, 2008; Scholarios and Marks, 2004). To promote workplace flexibility, organizations can focus on the following areas: work-home relationship, work-life identity construction and regulation, and domestic and family labor (Putnam et al., 2013). It is worth noting that some participants (e.g., P11) found it difficult to find an organization that was willing to accommodate their needs for flexible work, so they pursued entrepreneurship as an alternative. P11's story is aligned with the existing literature,

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arguing that women are motivated to be entrepreneurs due, in part, to the need to balance work and life (Caputo & Dolinsky, 1998; Lundstrom, 1999; Mckay, 2001).

Building Reentering Programs

There is a dearth of scholarship to guide organizations trying to build reentering programs. However, lessons can be learned from relevant areas in organizational studies such as training transfer programs for newcomers. For example, Simosi (2012) noted that effective training should be collaborative, including perceived organizational support, supervisory support, and colleague support. He concluded that the support could help employees develop affective commitment towards the organization. His argument was backed up by P11, who said that organizations could make individuals feel valued and motivated by providing training and assistance when they provide support.

To address returners' unique challenges, Sullivan and Mainiero (2008) stressed the need to provide on-the-job refresher courses to returners. If this advice had been taken by P6's organization, their suggestions could have significantly relieved her stress upon return. P6 noted that she did not have access to training resources when she returned to work. P6's story reminds organizations that returners, at the time of onboarding, are missing out on the organizational training and development network. The literature also suggests other supplementary strategies, such as installing nursing rooms for new mothers (Grissom and Reininger, 2012).

Social Support

Extant research shows that careers should be examined in the broad context of a larger social context (Gunz, Mayrhofer, & Tolbert, 2011; Johns, 2001). Many societal issues such as the external labor market and social relationships are significant influencers of individuals' career development (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007). Therefore, individuals count on social

support and guidance for sustainable career development (Van Esbroeck, 2008). Next, I explain the specific social support strategies that can effectively support returners.

Promoting Equitable Access to Quality Childcare

Studies have found that access to childcare could heavily influence women's ability to reenter the workplace (Nakamura & Ueda, 1999). In the present study, the participants relied heavily on intergenerational support for childcare when working. The situation is not unique to the participants in the present study because numerous studies have found that in China, more young people now choose to live with their parents to form the so-called child-centered co-residence (Chen, 2005; Pilkauskas & Cross, 2018). However, due to its informal nature, intergenerational support is contingent on many factors such as appropriate intergenerational living arrangements (Chen, 2005) and the relatively young age of the co-resident parents (Zhou, Kan, & He, 2021). In addition, young couples need to provide upward support to their parents when needed (Zhou et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to promote consistent and sustainable support to relieve young couples' childcare responsibilities, such as providing equitable access to quality childcare. However, the number of state-supported childcare facilities has significantly declined in the last few decades (Zhang & Huang, 2020). In 1989, 90 percent of the childcare facilities in China were state-owned public facilities, but in 2010, almost all of them were gone (Sohu, 2021). A good example for China to follow is the Norwegian government's considerable investment in expanding its daycare sector and lowering childcare prices since 2003. Thanks to the support, the country facilitated "a faster entry into work after childbirth for mothers" (Rønsen & Kitterød, 2015, p. 84). P11 added that parents with older children require even more flexibility to meet their children's teachers and take their children to tutoring centers. Therefore, external assistance for childcare is needed at various stages.

Designing and Delivering High-Level Vocational Training for Skilled Workers

Vocational and educational training in China comes from three primary sources: government and public institutions, vocational education and training institutions, and organizations (Cooke, 2005). However, skilled returners have been largely overlooked by these sources. For example, the All-China Women's Federation was established to support Chinese women and meet their numerous needs. In 2001, it launched the *Countrywide Women's Federation Talent Development Training Center*, offering training programs such as early childhood education and management. However, the training programs were, in general, poorly designed with outdated industry knowledge, superficial content, and a homogeneous design. One plausible explanation is that the programs were initially designed for less-educated Chinese women, ignoring that highly educated career women and skilled workers also need learning resources regarding early childhood education and management. Due to a lack of vocational training, the participants in the present study had to rely on their own resources, such as previous connections at work, to improve skills and industry knowledge.

In addition to content development, the vocational training should include various forms such as case-based learning, semester-long programs, one-on-one mentorship, networking events, in-person lectures, onsite training in collaboration with corporations, and follow-up support (Bluestone, Johnson, Fullerton, Carr, Alderman, & Tempo, 2013).

Building Onramps and Leveraging Resources for Returners

Economists found that training efforts initiated at the societal level could improve the quality of the labor force and boost national economic growth (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). To help returners, countries such as the U.K. and the United States implemented national campaigns, built onramps, and leveraged resources for those in need (Grissom and Reininger,

2012; Herman, 2011). The resources provided by these campaigns include online distance learning courses initiated by a university in partnership with the government (Herman, 2011).

In contrast to these efforts in Western countries, there is no top-down nationwide training, campaign, or support specifically for returners in China. For example, participants complained that flexible employment opportunities were not available when they decided to return. The solution could be a website synthesizing employment information and job postings. A good example is FlexJobs developed by a prior stay-at-home mom. FlexJobs strives to build a space where people seeking flexible employment or reentry opportunities can find informative resources, such as avoiding job scams, cover letter tips, job interviewing tips, job search motivation, job search tips, networking tips, resume tips, and social media for job seekers. It also incorporates information and resources for flexible work options such as freelance jobs, flexible schedule jobs, part-time jobs, and remote jobs.

Borrowing from the successful experience in other countries, the Chinese government could support returners in multiple ways, such as providing online distance learning courses in partnership with universities and launching a website synthesizing career opportunities with flexibility options.

Regulating Labor Market and Penalizing Misconduct

Corporate misconduct includes "acts that violate laws or regulations or that are legal but considered morally wrong" (Neville, Byron, Post, & Ward, 2018, p. 2541). In their landmark research about corporate misconduct, Arlen and Kraakman (1997) asserted that "corporates don't misbehave, people do" (p. 695). Participants from the present study witnessed misconduct in the form of unethical behavior such as discriminating against women in the hiring process, cutting employees' maternal leave, and delaying paychecks for no legitimate reason.

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Scholars pointed out that China's labor market reform has been dragged down by the inconsistency between the central government's state policy intentions and local governments' implementation (Meng, 2012). For example, although it is illegal to ask interview questions about marital status, the number of children, and even the desire to give birth, participants in this study were still asked these questions in interviews. One silver lining for those who experienced gender discrimination is that the Chinese government issued a *Circular about Further Regulating Recruitment and Promoting Women's Employment* in February 2019, aimed at standardizing recruitment practices and monitoring corporate misconduct in the hiring process. Organizations could face a maximum fine of U.S. $7,451 if they include gender-discriminatory criteria in their job postings.

Implications for Practice and Research

This study advances research and practice. In this section, I discuss major implications for multiple stakeholders.

Implications for Practice

This study has several practical implications for policymakers, HRD practitioners, career counselors, and career women. First, individuals from this study reported lifelong learning as an important coping strategy for their successful return. However, three primary sources of vocational learning, namely organizations, government and public institutions, and vocational education and training institutions (Cooke, 2005), all failed to address these participants' need for continuous learning. The findings from this study draw attention to this gap and help policymakers identify appropriate interventions (e.g., case-based learning, semester-long program, one-on-one mentoring, networking events) and leverage resources (e.g., a website of

flexible work options) to support lifelong learning, thus ameliorating the challenges well-educated women face as they prepare to return.

The findings also enable HRD practitioners to identify some of the greatest challenges facing women with career interruptions, such as the competitive job market and limited flexible work options. With a deeper understanding of these challenges, HRD practitioners could offer informed suggestions for policymakers to support returners. The study also provides specific practical implications for HRD practitioners in China. At the organizational level, the participants' life stories draw attention to the widespread corporate misconduct, such as gender and age discrimination in the hiring process. At the individual level, this study draws attention to social attitudes, such as parents' influence on women's choice between working inside or outside the system. These findings help expand practitioners' understanding of women's career development in China.

The study has practical implications for career counselors as well. Considering that the participants chose a *let be* attitude and flexibly sought opportunities in unplanned events, the present study suggests that career counselors could introduce the Taoism strategic non-action perspective into career counseling services. The counseling strategies proposed by this study could expand the application of Taoism to areas where noninterfering counseling is instrumental (e.g., when a client is struggling with psychological intensity in a career transition such as a career break). In addition, the *let be* attitude is also an important strategy for not internalizing the judgement and turning it into judgement of oneself, which hurts individuals' overall experience with the career interruption.

Lastly, the career stories shared by the participants could motivate and inspire career women who experience similar struggles. Reflecting on their career interruption experiences, the

participants assured their peers that everyone will land a job through non-stop learning and determination. In addition, their strategies, such as engaging in ongoing self-analysis and practicing self-care, provide valuable insights for individuals navigating their own career breaks.

Implications for Research

The findings from this study have several implications for HRD scholarship. First, previous studies have drawn heavily on the researchers' research experience (Field & Paddison, 1989; Padula, 1994) and conceptualization (Schneer & Reitman, 1997) in defining career interruptions. This study expands scholarly understanding of career interruptions by presenting the participants' own definitions, perceptions, and what the they believed were society's perceptions of career interruptions. In so doing, this study provides a fresh perspective on how to define and perceive career interruptions based on firsthand experience.

Second, the present study bridges the western career transition literature and the Chinese Taoism philosophy in coping with career interruptions. In so doing, this study proposed counseling services that can address the needs of both the active interveners and appreciators. Specifically, I suggest introducing the Taoism *let be* attitude and strategic non-action to help individuals navigate their career interruption period. Rather than overpower and change the status-quo, Taoism suggests approaching the system we live in through active imagination, intuition, and meaning-making, and eventually developing action through inaction (Coward, 1985). Therefore, it is especially constructive in coping with psychological and attitude issues (e.g., anxiety) related to career break experiences (Moss & Perryman, 2012).

The present study also fills several gaps in the career interruption literature. First, the literature has predominantly focused on the consequences of a career interruption (Cools & Strøm, 2016; Duvivier & Nancy, 2015; Evers & Sieverding, 2014; Hotchkiss et al., 2017; Leung

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et al., 2016; Looze, 2014; Napari, 2010; Taniguchi, 1999). However, little effort has been made to investigate lived experiences of career interruptions. My dissertation delineates career interruptions in terms of career decisions leading to a career interruption, the activities during the career interruption, opportunities and challenges, preparation before reentry, and the barriers in social and cultural contexts. The participants' life experiences and deep reflections help HRD researchers better understand career interruptions and the larger phenomenon of non-traditional careers. Second, women's career interruptions have been examined in various cultural and social contexts, including Norway (Rønsen & Kitterød, 2015), Ireland (Herman, 2011), Belgium (Frey, 2014), the Republic of Korea (Lee & Baek, 2014), and Japan (Nakamura & Ueda, 1999; Zhou, 2015). However, little is known about women taking career breaks in China. The present study provides a detailed and in-depth description of Chinese women's career interruptions. Certain aspects that are unique and pertinent to the Chinese context (e.g., choosing between a job within or outside of the system, parents' strong preferences for "iron rice bowl" jobs, paternal influence on children's career decisions) could help expand the current understanding of women's career opportunities and struggles in China and other eastern countries that share similar culture patterns with China.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its significant contribution to career development literature, this study has several limitations primarily as a result of the boundaries set for the targeted population, geographical location, and the time frame of research. First, this study focuses on urban Chinese women in their thirties. While this decision was intentional, it likely has left out some significant findings of the career interruption phenomenon that can be learned from studying other groups of people. Therefore, future exploration about career interruptions could include different populations to

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identify the commonalities and differences of career break experiences among various cohorts. For example, the past few decades have witnessed tremendous changes in all aspects of China, such as national policies, labor force situation, economic status, and gender expectations. Studying career-related issues for different age groups could help us better understand the shifts in women's career development over time. In addition, women living in rural areas face unique challenges due to their limited educational resources and employment opportunities. Therefore, their career trajectories and experiences are likely different compared with well-educated urban Chinese women. Furthermore, it is worth comparing career women and men because according to signal theory (Albrecht et al., 1999), society may perceive that it is more acceptable for women to have career interruptions, but a man taking a career break sends a negative signal to his managers that he is not committed to work. Thus, future studies are needed to explore men's career interruption experiences and the consequences in future studies.

Due to time constraints, I cannot further pursue several new lines of inquiry that emerged from this study. For example, this study found that affirmative action could lead to adverse career outcomes for women who receive implicit preferential treatment at work. For instance, organizations allowing women to leave early to pick up children could make them less likely to be promoted. Future research could explore more in-depth about this phenomenon, other forms of preferential treatment women receive at work, the positive and negative consequences, and proper interventions. Another topic could be vocational training and its target population. Previous studies on vocational training predominantly focus on high school or even younger students (Malamud & Pop-Eleches, 2010) and organizations' current employees (Beck, Kabst, & Walgenbach, 2009). This study points in the direction of conducting vocational training research among other groups of people, such as the well-educated career women included in this study.

Another interesting topic is the interactive relationship between national policies and women's career development. In recent years, the Chinese central government and the local government launched several new policies to support women's career development in response to the declining birth rate. For example, in the academia, age limits for different local and national funds were altered to support slightly older women. In 2011, the National Natural Science Foundation of China changed the age limit from 35 to 40 for female candidates applying for funds (the age limit for male candidates remains unchanged). In 2021, Shandong province announced that the age limit of applying for the *Fund for the Distinguished Young Scholars* was changed to up to 42 for women (the age limit is 40 for male candidates). For women with career interruptions, the age limit change could help relieve age discrimination in the hiring process. However, the new policies could also intensify the pervasive gender stereotypes of seeing women as the primary caregivers. The interactive relationship between these national policies and women's career development is an intricating and meaningful topic, but the participants' discussion of their lived experiences did not touch on this topic much. Thus, future studies could further investigate the current policies and their effects in assisting the female population in the labor force.

Conclusion

In the current environment, individuals are more likely to have non-linear and interrupted careers due to the fast shift in global business and career types (Boushey, 2008; Cabrera, 2007; Elley-Brown et al., 2018; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). However, despite their best efforts, most people face considerable challenges when they reenter the workplace. For career women, children, marriage, and other family responsibilities were once a primary barrier for reentering (Maurer-Fazio et al., 2007). Furthermore, expensive daycare and inflexible working hours

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further hinder reentry (Song & Dong, 2018). These challenges have caught the attention of researchers and practitioners worldwide. Most research has focused on the adverse outcomes of taking career interruptions and found that interrupting one's career can significantly deteriorate one's career development due, in part, to position loss and a wage penalty upon return (S. V. Arun, T. G. Arun, & Borooah, 2004; Evers & Sieverding, 2014). These issues have been further compounded by career break stigma. In many fields, such as STEM, broken careers are labeled as incompetent and unprofessional (Herman, 2015; Mavriplis et al., 2010). However, little is known in terms of what strategies could help individuals successfully reenter the workplace.

In China, the context of this study, women struggle with a wide gender wage gap, workplace discrimination, the glass ceiling, traditional stereotypes, and a lack of support. In light of these economic, societal, and cultural challenges, Chinese women's participation in the workplace has declined since the 1980s (Burnett, 2010; Cooke & Xiao, 2014). Although many Chinese women have chosen to exit their career tracks at certain points in life, little is known about the stories behind their career decisions, their experiences, and the strategies they utilized. This dissertation project investigated Chinese women's career interruption experiences in depth and, more importantly, explored the personal skills, organizational support, and national policies that can ease the reentering process.

To answer my research questions, I collected qualitative data primarily through intensive interviews (in-depth, one-to-one individual interviews). By interviewing 21 urban Chinese women who had a least one interruption in their career, the current study deeply explored individuals' perceptions of career interruptions, the career interruption and reentering experiences, the career decision-making process, social and cultural contexts, and individuals' reflections and strategies. Guided by constructivist grounded theory, the stories the participants

shared help us understand the mechanism of career interruptions, the opportunities and challenges of women experiencing a career interruption in Chinese society, and how career interruptions could be reconstructed and re-examined in future studies.

At the community level, the dissertation contributes to the human resource development (HRD) community by investigating the underexplored career phenomenon—career interruptions, adding new knowledge to the career development field. By selecting China as the research avenue, the findings shed light on the unique experiences shaped by a particular national context.

At the societal and national level, this exploration of career interruptions provides practical insights for HRD professionals, career counselors, social workers, adult educators, and individuals who need to help employees and particularly women navigate career breaks. Recently, the vulnerability of following a linear and uninterrupted career path has been cruelly revealed by the outbreak of a global COVID-19 pandemic. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), as of October 2020, the number of people unemployed in the United States reached 11.1 million. The unemployment rate also reached a historic high (6%) in China "even after China resumed work and production" in April 2020 (Ding, 2020). This unexpected crisis has made the research that focuses on a successful return to work more imminent than ever.

This grounded theory study provides much needed insights into the adjustment period during and after a career break, especially under the current circumstances where a considerable number of people are struggling with an abrupt change in their career path due to COVID-19. With a specific emphasis on career women, this study also sheds light on women's unique situations and struggles and provides strategies to facilitate women's reentry into the workplace after career interruptions. In contemporary society, both career men and women are experiencing

career interruptions; however, women face more challenges due to the deeply rooted social norms, gender stereotypes, and bias. It is my hope that this study will give women evidence-based strategies to help them in returning to the workplace.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION
(Common Rule –Effective January, 2018)

August 10, 2020

Any study that requires in person or face-to-face study visits may not begin or resume until your site has an approved plan that adheres to the re-opening guidelines posted on the Division of Research's VPR website: https://vpr.tamu.edu/covid-19. This plan is to be sent to your Department Chair and Dean, then forwarded to the Clinical Research, Education and Service Advisory Committee for approval.

Type of Review:	Initial Review Submission Form
Title:	Career Interruptions: A Grounded Theory Approach
Investigator:	Jia Wang
IRB ID:	IRB2020-0758
Reference Number:	112436
Funding:	Internal Funds
Documents Reviewed:	Consent Form Chinese Version 2.0 2.0 Consent Form 2.0 2.0 Authorization Letter 1.0 Letter of Cultural Evaluation (China) 1.0 Recruitment Email Chinese Version 2.0 2.0 Recruitment Email 2.0 2.0 Translation Certificate 1.0 Focus Group Questions Chinese Version 1.0 Focus Group Questions 1.0 Interview Questions Chinese Version 1.0 Interview Questions 1.0
Review Category	Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: i. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; ii. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or iii. The

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	information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by .111(a)(7).

Dear Jia Wang:

The HRPP determined on August 10, 2020 that this research meets the criteria for Exemption in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104.

This determination applies only to the activities described in this IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Please use the reviewed, stamped study documents (available in iRIS) for applicable study procedures (e.g. recruitment, consent, data collection, etc...). If changes are needed to stamped study documents or study procedures, you must immediately contact the IRB. You may be required to submit a new request to the IRB.

Your exemption is good for three (3) years from the Approval Start Date (08/10/2020). Thirty days prior to that time, you will be sent an Administrative Check-In Notice to provide an update on the status of your study.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Administrative Office at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636.

Sincerely,
IRB Administration

APPENDIX B

AUTHORIZATION LETTER

Authorization Letter

To whom it may concern,

I, Ruijuan Zhang (current lecturer of China Women's University), am writing this letter to authorize Xinyi Bian and her research team to conduct their grounded theory research about career interruptions among Chinese participants.

Their research is well-designed and culturally appropriate. I didn't see any potential risks for the Chinese participants involved in this study.

Thank you for your assistance!

Printed Signature _____Ruijuan   Zhang_____

Printed Date_____8/09/2020_____

Signature_____*Ruijuan Zhang*_____

Date_____8/09/2020_____

证明信

本人张瑞娟（就职于中华女子学院）兹证明研究员卜心怡及其团队从事的关于职业中断的研究可以在中国招收被访者。这项研究各方面设计完善且符合中国文化习惯。我没有发现任何会损害受访者利益的地方。

谢谢您对这项研究的支持！

签名_____*张瑞娟*_____

时间_____2020年8月9日_____

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APPENDIX C

CULTURAL EVALUATION LETTER

A Letter of Cultural Evaluation

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter of cultural evaluation as requested by the IRB application of the study named "Chinese women's career interruptions: A constructivist grounded theory approach". This study plans to recruit participants from China. As a native Chinese who is currently residing in Shanghai, China, I am going to evaluate the cultural appropriateness of this proposed study from three aspects.

A. Subject Recruitment
a. Is the method of recruitment culturally appropriate?

The method of recruitment, as mentioned by this specific study, is culturally appropriate.

b. Is the setting of recruitment procedures culturally appropriate?

The setting of recruitment procedures is also culturally appropriate.

c. Are recruitment instruments, such as a flyer or email socially acceptable?

The study plans to use emails as its recruitment instrument. I've read through the email and found nothing inappropriate.

d. If offering compensation, is the amount/form of payment coercive to participants?

No compensation is linked to this specific study.

B. Consent
a. Is the language and tone used in the consent form/information sheet understandable to the participants?

Yes. The consent form is written in a very easy-to-understand language.

b. Will the format of consent process intimidate or confuse participants?

No, I don't think so. It was written in a gentle and polite tone.

c. Does the setting of the consent process allow for adequate privacy?

Yes. The consent process allows for adequate privacy.

C. Risk
a. Are additional safeguards required to protect the rights and welfare of subjects?

No, I don't think so.

b. Could altering some of the procedures lower the risks to participants from a cultural perspective? If so, please explain.

The study is well-designed, and I cannot see any potential risks on the participants from a cultural perspective.

Printed Signature_____Xiaoying Zhang_____

Date_____07/25/2020_____

APPENDIX D

TRANSLATOR CERTIFICATE

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

CERTIFICATE of TRANSLATION

When to use this form: If you expect to enroll more than one non-English speaking subject in the United States or in a foreign country, submit this form with translated materials to indicate the qualifications of the translator. The Certificate of Translation is required to verify that the translations are accurate. Those who translate the material are to provide a brief description of their qualifications, skills or experience for serving in this role and sign the certificate of translation form.

Please note the following:
- For research conducted in languages other than English, the IRB requires the consent and other research material as applicable (e.g. surveys, instruments, recruitment, etc.) in both English and the language in which research is being conducted.
- Researchers may wish to delay the initial translation until after the IRB has reviewed and approved the English versions. Doing so may help researchers avoid multiple translations.
- If the translated versions of the documents are submitted to the IRB after initial approval of the English version, please submit an amendment along with the translated material and a copy of the certificate of translation.

Section 1. PROTOCOL INFORMATION

A. Principal Investigator:	Jia Wang
B. IRB Study Number:	IRB2020-0758
C. Study Title:	*Career Interruptions: A Grounded Theory Approach*

Section 2. TRANSLATOR

A. Translator's Name:	Xinyi Bian
B. Translator Email Address:	bxy4812@tamu.edu
C. Translator's Qualifications:	Native Speaker of Chinese
D. Language of translation:	Chinese
E. Name of Translation Service (when applicable):	

2E. List of document(s) translated:
Recruitment Letter; Consent Form; Interview Questions; Focus Group Questions

2F. Date(s) of translation(s):
06/26/2020-07/02/2020

2G. The translator declares that they are fluent in and understand the English language and the language of translation. The non-English documents for this study are a true and accurate translation of the English documents. By signing below, I, the translator, agree with this statement.

Xinyi Bian   07/02/2020
Translator Signature   Date

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APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT LETTER CHINESE VERSION

招募邮件

招募关于职业中断研究的参与者

您好，

我叫卞心怡，目前是美国德州农工大学人力资源发展专业的在读博士。我想邀请您参加一项关于职业中断（离开职场一段时间）的研究。您被选中参加研究是因为您有过离开职场的经历，并且年满十八岁。我从某某处得到了您的联系方式。

如果您愿意参加这项研究的话，您可以参加一个一对一的采访，这个采访大概在 60-120 分钟之间。研究活动会在经过您许可的情况下录音。录音在录音完成的两个月后会删除销毁。研究成果如果发表，一定会进行加密处理，比如使用化名。请相信我们，我们会确保您隐私和信息安全。

这项研究完全秉持自愿原则。您可以选择参加或者不参加这项研究。如果选择参加，我们提问过程中，您也完全可以跳过任何您不愿意回答的问题。您也有权决定中途退出。我们无条件尊重您的决定。

如果您决定参加这项研究，请发邮件到 bxy4812@tamu.edu.

我们非常感谢您的支持！也诚心希望我们的研究能帮助到那些因为职业断裂而在求职过程中遇到种种困难的普通人。

谢谢！

<div align="right">卞心怡</div>

RECRUITMENT LETTER ENGLISH VERSION

Recruitment Email

Participants Needed for A Study about Interrupted Careers

Dear [*insert name*],

My name is Xinyi Bian and I am a Ph.D. student from the Educational Human Resource Development Department at Texas A&M University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about individuals' career interruptions (a break from employment for a certain period). You're eligible to be in this study because you experienced or are experiencing one or several career breaks, and you are 18 years and older. I obtained your contact information from [*describe source*].

If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in a virtual interview (60-120 mins). The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. You may skip any questions that you don't want to answer. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at bxy4812@tamu.edu.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Xinyi Bian

CONSENT FORM CHINESE VERSION

同意书

研究项目：关于职业中断的扎根理论研究

研究人员：卞心怡 （人力资源发展专业在读博士，德州农工大学）

Jia Wang （人力资源发展专业教授，德州农工大学）

为什么邀请您参加我们的研究？

因为您有过职业中断的经历，并且年满十八岁。

为什么要做这项研究？

越来越多的人因为种种原因比如怀孕生子，企业合并重组，兴趣爱好的变化，移居其他城市或国家等等而自愿或者不得不中断现有的职业路线。我们希望能对职业中断的经历有更充分的了解，以便帮助那些要面临同样的机遇和挑战的人们。

这项研究会占用多久？

一对一的个人采访一般在 60-120 分钟之间。如果您愿意的话，我们研究完成以后还会有一个研究成果的核对，也就是让您看看我们得出的研究结果是不是符合您的本意。这个核对过程大概会占用 10 分钟。

如果您决定参加这项研究的话会发生什么呢？

基于新冠疫情的影响，所有的采访和焦点小组会在网上进行。通过您选择的方式，比如 Zoom, Skype 或者微信视频等，我们会完成一个 60 分钟到 120 分钟的采访。采访时间我们会短信，微信，或者邮件约定。如果需要的话，我们也可以提前将采访提纲发到您邮箱。如果您愿意参加焦点小组，我们也会同样跟您约定时间。您可以选择只参加一对一采访或者焦点小组，也欢迎您两者都参加。您的参加对我们来说意义重大，非常感谢！

如果您不想参加的话会发生什么呢？

我们完全尊重您的意愿。感谢您给我们时间介绍我们的研究。谢谢！

研究过程中产生的数据会怎么样呢？

您对我们说的话是完全保密的，我们以后可能会公开发表研究内容，但是即便如此也一定会做加密处理，比如使用化名。我们会保证别人无法从读到的论文内容联系到您。

参加焦点小组的情况会相对而言比较复杂。我们会在活动前要求所有参加人员尊重对方，并对内容保密。

采访内容会录下来吗？

我们不会录像，但是录音能帮助我们更好更准确地记录采访内容，所以如果您能准许录音的话，我们将非常感激。不过您有权力选择拒绝录音。

_____ 在受访过程中我同意被录音。

_____ 在受访过程中我不同意被录音。

如果有疑问我该联系谁?

您可以联系卞心怡 （邮箱 bxy4812@tamu.edu，微信号：Angdingbian），也可以联系 Jia Wang 教授 (jiawang@tamu.edu). 您也可以联系德州农工大学的人体研究保护项目（邮箱：irb@tamu.edu 或者电话：1-979-458-4067）

如果您同意参加的话，请在下面签上姓名和日期，谢谢!

受访者签名　　　_____

日期　　　　_____

采访者签名　　_____

日期　　　　_____

CONSENT FORM ENGLISH VERSION

Title of Research Study: Career Interruptions: A Grounded Theory Approach

Investigator: Xinyi Bian (current PhD student in Educational Human Resource Development, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas)
　　　　　　Dr. Jia Wang (Professor, Educational Administration and Human Resource Development, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas)

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are invited to participate in this study because we are trying to learn more about individuals' career interruptions.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you had experienced one or several career breaks. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

Why is this research being done?
The research is designed to help us get a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals with interrupted careers. And the study will also add new knowledge to existing literature about career development and consulting for people with broken careers.

How long will the research last?
The interview will take 60-120 minutes of your time. There will also be a 10-minute member check if you are willing to participate (we will state our major findings and check with you if you agree with them, the member check can be done through video chat, messaging, or calling, whichever you prefer).

What happens if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research"?
If you are willing to participate, an interview with the investigator will be scheduled. Due to the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews will be conducted via Zoom, Skype, or other software to avoid human contact. You can withdraw anytime during the process. I would audio-record the interview only with your consent.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can decide not to participate in this research and it will not be held against you. You can leave the study at any time.

Is there any way being in this study could harm me?
There are no sensitive questions in this interview that should cause discomfort. However, you can skip any question you do not wish to answer, or exit the interview at any point.

What happens to the information collected for the research?
The information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law.
The results of the research study may be published, but no one will be able to identify

you or any information about you.

In the focus groups, everyone will be asked to respect the privacy of the other group members. All participants will be asked not to disclose anything said within the context of the discussion, but it is important to understand that other people in the group with you may not keep all information private and confidential.

Will the interview be audio-recorded?

Audio-recording will help us accurately capture all the valuable information and details you generously shared with us. But you can choose to say yes or no to our audio-recording request.

_____ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

_____ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

Who can I talk to?

Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact Xinyi Bian later at *bxy4812@tamu.edu* and/*or* (979) 703-0831, or Dr. Jia Wang at jiawang@tamu.edu if you have additional questions or concerns.

You may also contact the Human Research Protection Program at Texas A&M University (which is a group of people who review the research to protect your rights) by phone at 1-979-458-4067, toll free at 1-855-795-8636, or by email at irb@tamu.edu for:

- additional help with any questions about the research
- voicing concerns or complaints about the research
- obtaining answers to questions about your rights as a research participant
- concerns in the event the research staff could not be reached
- the desire to talk to someone other than the research staff

Please scan the signed consent form, and send it back to bxy4812@tamu.edu. Thank you in advance!

Signature of Participant   _____

Printed Name of Participant   _____   Date_____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____   Date _____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent _____

INTERVIEW GUIDE (FOR INTENSIVE INTERVIEWS) CHINESE VERSION

采访提纲

1. 请您描述一下您的职业轨迹。比如说哪一年在哪里做过哪些工作，如果有职业中断的话，中断了几次，分别中断了几年等等。
2. 您怎么定义职业中断呢？
3. 您能不能向我描述一下您的工作呢？比如地理位置，企业文化，人际关系，你的自我发展，工资薪酬福利，还有你的满意度等等。您只需要分享那些您愿意分享的信息就可以。
4. 您为什么中断工作呢？如果不止一次的话，您可以分开来一次一次地讲。
5. 您能不能描述一下您在不工作的那些年，您做了些什么？感受是怎么样的？您想了一些什么事情？
6. 你对当时中断工作这个决定感受如何？当时是怎么想的，现在又是怎么想的？
7. 职业中断期您的精神状态怎样？
8. 那么您重回职场是为什么呢？
9. 您对重回职场感觉怎样？
10. 为了重回职场您做了哪些准备？
11. 您有值得依赖的外在支持吗？或者是您希望自己能拥有什么样的外在支持呢？
12. 回溯您的职业生涯，您有什么样的感悟？
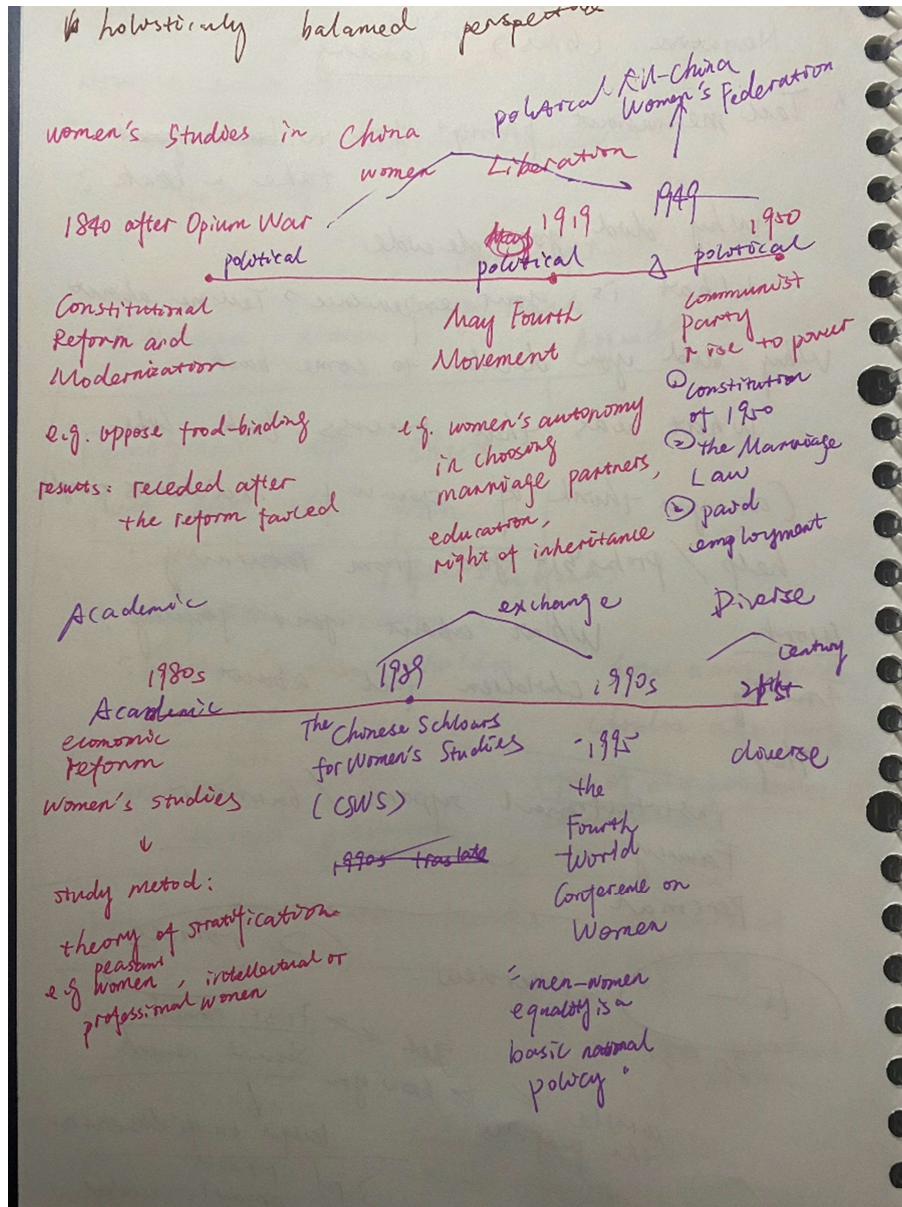13. 您以后的职业规划是怎么样的？
14. 如果让您给一些面临职业中断的人一些建议，您会说些什么？

APPENDIX J

INTERVIEW GUIDE (FOR INTENSIVE INTERVIEWS) ENGLISH VERSION

1. Could you please describe your career path for me? How many jobs did you have? What kind of jobs? How many career breaks did you have? How long were those breaks? Please give me a timeline of your career path.

2. How would you define career interruptions?

3. Could you please describe your work for me? Like the location, organizational culture, work relations, satisfactory level, motivation level, etc.? Anything you feel comfortable about sharing.

4. What made you leave your job? If you have several career breaks, you can share it with me one by one.

5. Could you please describe your break time with me? What did you do at that time? How did you feel? What were you thinking about?

6. How do you feel about that decision (of opting out), back then and at this moment?

7. How about your mental activities in your break time? Please share anything psychologically or spiritually.

8. What motivated you to go back to work?

9. How do you feel about the reentering experiences?

10. What kind of preparation did you do?

11. What kind of external support did you have, or you wish you had?

12. When you reflect on your career path, how do you feel?

13. What's your career plan for the future?

14. What kind of suggestions will you give to people who are about to interrupt their careers?

to holistically balanced perspective

women's studies in China

political All-China Women's Federation

women Liberation

1840 after Opium War

May 1919   1949

political   political   △ 1950 political

Constitutional
Reform and
Modernization

May Fourth
Movement

Communist
Party
↑ rise to power

① Constitution
of 1950

e.g. oppose food-binding

e.g. women's autonomy
in choosing
marriage partners,
education,
right of inheritance

② the Marriage
Law

results: receded after
        the reform failed

③ paid
employment

Academic   exchange   Diverse

                                        century

1980s   1988   1990s   21st

Academic
economic
reform

The Chinese Scholars
for Women's Studies
(CSWS)

-1995

the
Fourth
World
Conference on
Women

diverse

Women's studies
        ↓
study method:
theory of stratification
e.g. peasant
women, intellectual or
professional women

1990s translate

"men-women
equality is a
basic national
policy."

APPENDIX L

EAMPLE OF OBSERVATIONAL NOTES

Length: 71min

03/11/2021

Via Zoom video meeting

1. 您怎么定义职业中断呢？

   对我来说没人发钱，不领工资就算。（思考）读博士发的两千多人民币不算，太少了。我会觉得读书就算断裂。感觉跟工作不一样。

2. 您能不能向我描述一下您的工作经历呢？比如地理位置，企业文化，人际关系，你的自我发展，工资薪酬福利，还有你的满意度等等。您只需要分享那些您愿意分享的信息就可以。

第一份工作：工资其实还可以当时 13 年左右到手十五六万，但是工作蛮辛苦的。因为人力资源部人很少，一共只有六个人，当时我们有个同事怀孕了，她有一个肾两个子宫，她很紧张，基本没来上班，所以只有五个人。整个分行的事情都交给我，早八点到晚八点。有时候加加班做到十点十二点都有的。氛围的话就是其实一般吧，我没有，跟我后来的工作来比，这个单位因为大家事情都非常多，所以能自扫门前雪就不错了，相互社交和帮助比较少。而且银行里很多跟钱打交道，不好的事情（似乎难以分享细节），领导也不会太支持你。好的时候大家都能一起过，不好的时候也有（犹豫，没有分享细节或者事例）。

第二份工作：西南政法大学，整体工资低了很多，因为是大学的行政，加起来一个月六千都不到。但是工作轻松很多，每天早九点晚五点，加班也少，同事一起玩也多。你也有编制的，有时候领导说做什么不做也没什么。那时候我准备考博。我发现后面这个单位可能太闲了，嘴可能比之前的单位更碎一些，有个男生（嫌弃，略生气）翻我电脑看我跟老师联系的事情，然后去报告领导。考博士的想法是第一份工作临近第二年结束的时候，当时觉得工作挺没意思的，觉得自己社交能力也不怎么样，觉得要不再读个书吧，但是银行太忙了，就换了个工作。去学校就想着要考博，他们可能有资助读博的机会，但是有要求的，你要工作多少年，还要论资排辈，你要等很久。其实有激情的时候也就那么几年，再等可能就不读了。我就没等，就辞职来读博得。读完以后发现原来单位勉强才能进去，就很尴尬。当时领导说我们单位很好的，你辞职了可能回不来，当时不觉得，现在发现是真的。会劝说你不要辞职。