Silk and steel: A gendered approach to career and life by upper echelon women executives in the hospitality and tourism industry in China

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study represents one of the early attempts to uncover the lived experience of thriving of top female leaders in the tourism and hospitality industry in China. Based on the narratives of 21 women executives in the hospitality and tourism industry in China, this study reveals that upper echelon (top management) females thrive by taking a gendered approach to life and career in a cultural environment with a strong Confucian tradition. This research systematically explored the unique gendered orientations and strategies these women executives used to achieve optimal functioning, as manifested in their thriving in both life and career. They acknowledge gender differences, embrace female qualities rather than deny them, and leverage these qualities to their advantage. The study findings offer significant theoretical and practical implications by illuminating a thriving perspective of the career advancement of women.

1. Introduction

Women account for more than half of the tourism and hospitality workforce, primarily occupying entry level and mid-level management positions (UNWTO & UN Women, 2011). In addition, most tourism and hospitality programs in higher education are dominated by female students (Pizam, 2017). Given this, one would expect an overflowing pipeline of female talent moving up to top management positions (Cheung and Halpern, 2010). But in actuality, like many other sectors, a leaky pipeline of female talent persists in the hospitality industry as well, with women executives significantly underrepresented at the top of the field (Boone et al., 2013).

While the media has hailed the many success stories of women who have "made it" to the upper echelons in their field, the limelight tends to focus on the ultimate outcomes (vs. processes) of their success. Academic literature has provided a more nuanced account of the success of female leaders, although predominantly through an 'overcome barriers' lens, with various metaphors attached to the phenomenon such as glass ceiling (Knutson and Schmidgall, 1999), glass cliff (Ryan and Haslam, 2007), labyrinth (Eagly and Carli, 2007), concrete wall or sticky floor (Bell and Nkomo, 2001). While navigating societal, cultural, organizational and personal obstacles is clearly one of the major themes in the

success stories of women leaders, it is important to recognize that, just like their male counterparts, successful women executives manifest thriving in their careers and lives. However, there is a significant gap in our understanding of the 'thriving" element in the success of female leaders, partially because the "thriving" of women executives is often intertwined with and thus blurred by overcoming gender-related barriers and obstacles. To that end, this study uses human thriving (Brown et al., 2017) as an overarching theoretical framework to examine the unique orientations and strategies of upper echelon women in the hospitality and tourism industry in China in successfully navigating career and life. The term upper echelon refers to directors, top managers or executives who exert a powerful influence on strategic choice and organizational effectiveness (Hambrick and Mason, 1984).

The Chinese context presents a particularly interesting and fertile context for research on the career of women. Women in China appear to lead the way for upper echelon females and the trend seems to continue. According to the Grant Thornton International Business Report (Grant Thornton International Business Report, 2013), 51% of senior management positions were held by women in China, compared to 24%, the global average of the proportion of women in senior management roles. A number of empirical work have revealed that Chinese companies often struggle in transplanting Western practices into the Chinese context

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(Wang et al., 2005). While the dynamics of economic, political, societal and institutional contexts has significantly transformed Chinese society, the deeply rooted influence of Confucianism is likely to be sustained (Wang et al., 2005). In a nutshell, the Chinese context is essentially Confucianism meets Maoism – an ideological clash between the submission of women and gender equality in workforce participation (Litwin et al., 2019). As stated by Nancy Milton (Milton, 1971), the "emancipation of China's women… is one of the most impressive aspects of present-day Chinese society" (p. 107).

The present research took a qualitative approach to investigate the approach of upper echelon women to their personal and professional lives and leadership with regard to gender identity. We conducted 21 in-depth interviews among women executives in the hospitality and tourism industry in China. We use the term "silk and steel" to encapsulate a gendered approach such career women take to navigate career, life and leadership in this particular socio-cultural context.

2. Literature review

2.1. The career approaches of upper echelon women

The career advancement of women has been viewed as a slow and challenging process that requires constant overcoming of particular barriers. Previous studies predominantly focus on two areas: identifying barriers to career advancement (glass ceiling) and examining the role of upper echelon women with regard to firm performance. The glass ceiling literature has discussed some key social barriers (e.g., cultural influences on gender roles and lack of enforcement on gender equality employment; Clevenger and Singh, 2013), organizational barriers (e.g., misalignment with organizational culture, lack of networks and mentoring; Lyness and Thompson, 2000), and individual barriers (e.g., family responsibilities and unwillingness to relocate; Boone et al., 2013). These studies emphasized the role of organizations on mitigating the barriers for women and the proactive approach of women to overcome the barriers (Knutson and Schmidgall, 1999).

Research that has highlighted the role of upper echelon women in the corporate environment has focused on their roles as represented by tokenism (e.g., Kanter, 1977) and the glass cliff (Ryan and Haslam, 2007). The conceptual thread of this research stream is that upper echelon women are considered as tokens to symbolically represent gender equality within a company, or they are more likely to be promoted to top positions when a company performs poorly or is at high risk. The *think crisis—think female* association (Ryan et al., 2011) partly originated from the attributes of femininity (e.g., being understanding and empathetic) and the effectiveness of those attributes in times of crisis over masculine attributes (Ryan et al., 2016). This stream of research argued that organizations intentionally promote women to top management positions to achieve their organizational goals of presenting diversity and/or managing crises.

Researchers treat the roles of upper echelon women as aggregated gender representation and thus may have missed portraying individuals who thrive in their career and life while barriers and obstacles still exist. Previous studies largely focused on internal and external barriers that hinder women from advancing their career and life in the field (e.g., Boone et al., 2013; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). While these studies contribute to institutional and societal changes for women in the long-term, exploring how some women executives have thrived in their career and life is critical in understanding the positive functioning of women executives.

2.2. Human thriving

While the glass ceiling has long been a challenge for female career advancement, some women thrived whereas others struggled to survive or even succumbed to the situations of physical, psychological, institutional, and social adversities. Human thriving, from the positive

psychology perspective (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) offers a lens to shed light on an individual woman's subjective experience in successfully navigating her career and other aspects of life. Human thriving is defined as "the joint experience of development and success" (Brown et al., 2017, p. 168). It mirrors people's capacity for positive human functioning and adaption toward challenges (Carver, 1998). Thriving can be "a state, a process, or both" (p. 168) and thus involves two components: development and success (Brown et al., 2017). The development element is concerned with progressive improvements in physical, psychological or social dimensions (Brown et al., 2017). Intentional self-regulation is proposed as a mechanism to understand people's tendency of positive adaptation to different contexts (Gestsdóttir et al., 2011). People select the goals and resources, seek strategies that optimize resources and personal values associated with the goals, and consciously or unconsciously monitor the process and refine goals to minimize the loss (Gestsdóttir et al., 2011). On the other hand, the success element of thriving can be represented by various outcomes depending on the contexts and proximity in time. For example, psychological well-being, personal growth in knowledge, confidence, social relations, and high performance in a given context could be considered as outcomes of positive human functioning (Carver, 1998; Park, 1998). Development and success occur in tandem, and thus thriving is experienced by the combinations of progressive improvements in physical, psychological, and social natures and corresponding outcomes (Su et al., 2014).

Exploring upper echelon women's experiences of thriving in career and life not only provides a deeper understanding of the self-regulation process but also engages more women to thrive by sharing their unique approaches and strategies (Carver, 1998). In addition, it is worth noting that individual experiences are always embedded in broader socio-cultural contexts and thus paying attention to how cultural influence shapes an individual's experience of thriving is instrumental in developing a more conducive social and cultural environment that facilitates personal growth and thriving (Park, 1998).

2.3. The Chinese socio-cultural context

Confucianism has been the dominant school of ethical and moral thought in traditional Chinese culture for more than two thousand years. It was regarded as the state doctrine in the China's agricultural feudal past (Adamczyk and Cheng, 2015). Of particular relevance to this study is some gender-specific guiding principles in the Confucian doctrine, including *san cong* (trinity of female submission to male–father, husband and son), *si de* (female virtue, expression, demeanor and conduct), and *nei-wai* (literally translated as *inner-outer*, the gendered spatial binary of the private and domestic sphere by women and the public and societal realm by men). With regards to familial relations, Confucianism asserts that family is a basic unit embedded in a society and harmony among all family members is the ideal state of being (Chuang, 2005; Li et al., 2000). The Confucian paradigm also includes some key behavioral principles such as *wu lun* (respect for hierarchy), *li* (the collectivist principle of cooperation) and a time orientation that conceives time to be subjective, relative and flexible (Li, 2008; Wang et al., 2005). The impact of Confucianism is staggering, influencing over 20% of the world's population, with a geographical concentration in countries in Eastern Asia such as China, Japan and Korea (Miles and Goo, 2013).

Although gender-based teaching in Confucian doctrine has been abolished through public policies in modern China, Confucian etiquette is still one of the mainstream cultural values that exerts considerable influence on defining gender roles in China today. Women began to participate in paid employment and full-time work to attain gender parity after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Hershatter, 2004). Subsequently, numerous policies and regulations aiming to protect and guarantee women's rights in the workplace have been introduced. However, some existing policies did not take effect as expected. For instance, policies aiming to give women longer paid time

off during pregnancy and prenatal care has caused some companies to implicitly discriminate female applicants in recruitment and placement. Furthermore, women in the hospitality industry are often viewed through a stigmatized lens, because hospitality tends to remind people of entertainment, indulgence and extravagance, which are against the Chinese traditional virtues that advocate hard work, plain living, discipline, thrift and the like.

In 2019, women consisted of 43.7% of the total workforce in China, one of the highest rates of women participation in labor force in the Asia Pacific region (Catalyst, 2020). Specifically, in the hospitality and tourism industry in China, female employees accounted for about 65% of the total workforce, and female executives held about 30–50% of middle managerial positions and about 10% senior managerial positions (Yang, 2008; Fan, 2015). While the proportion of the women in the hospitality and tourism industry is expected to continue to increase (Liu et al., 2020), lack of education, work-family conflict, employer gender bias, the 'good old boys' network, and traditional gender stereotyped ideology are identified as some of the main barriers of Chinese women's career advancement in the field (Yang, 2008; Fan, 2015).

3. Methods

3.1. Research design and procedure

A qualitative research design with in-depth interviews was employed to explore the career paths and approaches to career, life/family and leadership by upper echelon women in the tourism and hospitality industry in China. The interviews were intended to elicit personal stories and lived experiences embedded in their contexts to identify patterns of the informants' career and life trajectories. Some of the elements in the research design resembled a feminist approach to research (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). For example, personal stories are considered to be powerful and relevant (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). Thus, researchers were deliberate in building a collaborative and interactive relationship with the informants and empowering them during the interviews to allow a dialog to capture the delicate nuances of meanings and concepts in women's lived experiences in a specific context (Sedgley et al., 2011) so that the informants' narratives naturally emerged (Rubin and Rubin, 2011).

Through a purposive sampling procedure, upper echelon women who held the equivalent of deputy general manager position or higher in hospitality and tourism organizations were selected. The informants were recruited from the China Women Tourism Council (CWTC), a professional association established in 1994 with a goal to develop the female workforce in the hospitality and tourism industry in China. CWTC holds an institutional membership in the International Female World Tourism Organization (IFWTO). At the time of this research, CWTC consisted of 116 members who were in top management positions in different sectors of the tourism and hospitality industry in China and provided its members with educational and networking opportunities.

A total of 87 council members and individuals were invited via email to participate in this research, among which 30 members agreed to face-to-face interviews. Consequently, 21 semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted until the researchers found no newly emerging concepts. The sample consisted of 21 upper echelon women who were employed or self-employed in the hospitality and tourism industry in China at the time of this research. They held positions such as chairperson of the board, general manager, museum curator, or director of tourism administration for the duration of at least 2 years. Informants aged between 34 and 64 years old. The majority of the interviewees (n = 18) were married (2 were divorced and 1 was widowed). Table 1 provides detailed information on their profiles.

The interviews were conducted by two of the authors, all females who are researchers in the field of hospitality and tourism. Having similar characteristics and experiences in the field with the informants are closely connected to researcher reflexivity (Berger, 2015). This helps

Table 1
Informant profiles.

No.	Age	Title	Company ownership	Industry sector
1	58	Chairperson of the board	State owned	Travel group
2	57	Vice general manager	Joint venture	Hotel
3	43	General manager	State owned	Travel group
4	63	Museum curator	Public institution	Museum
5	34	Vice general manager	Private	Restaurant group
6	53	Vice president	State owned	Tourism group
7	54	General manager	Private	Travel agency
8	48	Vice general manager	State owned	Government
9	54	Vice general manager	Public institution	Museum
10	57	Museum curator	State owned	Travel group
11	58	Vice general manager	State owned	Travel group
12	57	Chairperson of the board	Private	Hotel
13	56	General manager	Private	Travel agency
14	38	Vice general manager	State owned	Travel group
15	48	General manager	Private	Tea company
16	46	Secretary of CPC	State owned	Travel group
17	47	Vice president	Private	Investment
18	57	Vice director	Administrative organization	Tourist administration
19	59	Vice director	Administrative organization	Tourist administration
20	58	Vice general manager	State owned	Travel agency
21	54	Vice general manager	Public institution	Museum

the researchers to be more sensitive to the lived experience and unexpressed nuances of the informants' narratives since they understand the languages used in the narratives and the informants are willing to share when they perceive researchers as sympathetic to their stories and trustworthy (Berger, 2015). On the other hand, researchers also need to make deliberate efforts to keep the accuracy, quality, and trustworthiness of the study by maintaining objectivity (Valentine, 2007). In this study, by using a semi-structured interview format, the interviewers had predetermined questions that helped them stay focused and be conscious about their reactions (Berger, 2015). In addition, the interviews were conducted in a secured environment (e.g., coffee shops or separate rooms reserved on the conference venue) where the informants were able to freely share their personal stories. Interviewers also ensured that ample time was allotted to allow for a block of uninterrupted time based on the availability of the informants. Each interview lasted from one to one and a half hours and was audio-recorded upon informants' consent. To ensure reliability of the data, each transcript was translated from Chinese into English by a professional translator (Twinn, 1997) and then reviewed by two of the researchers who spoke both languages. The interview protocol was developed in collaboration with two general managers of international brand hotels located in Beijing, China. The final interview protocol consisted of the following four categories of questions: (a) personal information (e.g., age, job title, and affiliation), (b) career experiences (e.g., career paths and self-development), (c) life and family experiences (e.g., parenting and relationships with family members), and (d) leadership and gender identity (e.g., advantages and qualities).

3.2. Data analysis

The data was analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 12. A grounded theory approach was taken (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to allow main categories and sub-categories related to

female executives' approaches to career, family/life, and leadership to emerge from the data (Schreier, 2012). Thus, the coding process consisted of three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Two of the researchers independently conducted open coding to derive preliminary categories. The code book was developed by thoroughly reviewing the data. Based on preliminary categories obtained from open coding, the researchers performed axial coding to develop subcategories under each of the major categories. Selective coding was then used to compare the subcategories to examine commonalities and differences. The reliability of data analysis was measured by assessing inter-coder reliability. It was estimated by the proportion of total agreements between the coders and resulted in 90.9%, indicating an acceptable range of consistency. The researchers verified the results and rectified inconsistent coding through discussion.

The trustworthiness of the data and the study findings was examined in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the data collection and data analysis process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility, the congruence between the study findings and the research questions, was ensured by cross-checking the raw data and the translated version of the data by two authors. To support transferability, the study context and description of samples were provided in detail to allow researchers to evaluate the likelihood of the application of the study findings into their own contexts (Nowell et al., 2017). Dependability and confirmability are associated with assessing the reliability and the absence of bias in the process and final product of the inquiry and thus can be evaluated with an audit (Lincoln and Guba, 1982). The steps began with collecting raw data, including the data in the Chinese and English versions; a log of all activities in data collection and data analysis activities; and a log of uncovering primary findings as a result of data analysis. Then, one of the authors who was not involved in the data collection and data analysis conducted the audit following the steps suggested by Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln and Guba, 1982). The auditor closely inspected the process and the product (i.e., central ideas) and then compared the process with the research objectives as well as the raw data with the final products. The auditor and the rest of the authors had a series of meetings to debrief the process of data collection and data analysis and discussed any questions that arose from the auditing process.

4. Findings

The results that emerged from the data analysis show there were competing organizational, societal, familial and personal forces at work that the upper echelon women in this study had to navigate to advance their careers. The results suggested a consistent pattern of seemingly paradoxical yet harmonious approaches the informants took to navigate such competing forces and persevere. For the ease of discussion, this pattern was labeled as the silk-and-steel approach. Steel refers to the conventional organizational expectations and wisdom related to career advancement, while silk signifies the culturally-influenced and gendered approach to such challenges. The hybrid silk-and-steel approach offers a unique perspective of the success of the upper echelon women in the hospitality and tourism industry in China. In the section that follows, this paradoxically harmonious silk-and-steel approach is illustrated in three domains: career advancement, work-life, and leadership.

4.1. A "zigzag" pattern of career advancement

The data analysis showed a distinct pattern of career advancements by the informants in this study, characterized by an emergent (vs. deliberate) advancing process, multiple lateral (vs. vertical) moves over the course of their careers, and a varied (vs. fast track) rhythm of their career progression. We labeled this pattern of career advancements as the "zigzag" pattern.

4.1.1. Emergent (vs. deliberate) career advancing process

The data analysis showed a distinctive emergent approach taken by the informants to navigate their careers. The informants were inclined to take a reactive approach by focusing on seizing the opportunities that were offered to them rather than taking a proactive approach to deliberately plan or compete for promotion opportunities. The following quotes describe a typical emergent approach to career advancement:

All my jobs were appointed except transferring to the university from Women's Federation. And then I was promoted to work in Tourism Administration and it was appointed by my boss. In general, I have never clearly planned my career path (Interviewee 18).

Every time the company asked me to lead a project, I was able to take advantage of the opportunity. For example, I once was the general manager of two hotels in Sanya, but I still chose to return to Beijing upon request. Maybe many women would not make such a choice, but I seized the opportunity. I thought I couldn't give it up because such a platform in Beijing may not come around next time (Interviewee 17).

I was thrusted into the general manager position by my boss. Sometimes I think it was not a bad thing for me. I never actively competed for higher positions, but just tried my best to do the work as perfectly as I possibly can (Interviewee 3).

Contributing personal effort where it is needed in service of the collective goal is a cultural imprint apparent in the narratives of the informants. Confucius value systems emphasize a group orientation (Wang et al., 2005) that stresses subordinating personal interest to the collective interest. However, it is important to recognize how these upper echelon women consciously and subconsciously navigated the societal, cultural and organizational undercurrents to advance their careers.

4.1.2. Lateral vs vertical moves

The career trajectories shared by the informants showed that they were very open to lateral moves, as opportunities arose. A *lateral move* indicates that an employee moves to a new job with a similar salary, similar status level and job responsibility as the former one, and it can be a move either within the current company or to a new organization (Ng et al., 2007). Out of 21 informants, 12 of them shared this career path pattern. They averaged approximately 3 career moves in addition to internal transfers within an organization. The following quotes illustrate the pattern of lateral moves:

I worked as a vice-general manager for 8 years a State-owned Travel Agency, and earned the respect by the general managers there. I was transferred to the municipal government as an office director for 5 years, then I was sent to a hotel as vice-general manager again for 10 years (Interviewee 14).

At that time (about 1985), our jobs were assigned by the state. At first, I was sent to XX Hotel, and the hotel assigned me to the executive office, where I was responsible for writing internal news. Several days later, I was assigned to the catering department, where they needed an employee who could speak English. While I was not wanting to go, I thought it was not in good form to go against the assignment, so I accepted the transfer. Unexpectedly, no more than 15 days later, I was sent by the hotel to Guangzhou with all the chefs for training, and I was their English teacher. About three months later, I was appointed as the director of the catering department of the hotel (Interviewee 20).

The lateral pattern may reflect the cultural and gender expectations of respect for hierarchy and the collectivist principle of cooperation (Wang et al., 2005). Respect for hierarchy is rooted in the Confucian principle of *li* (propriety) and *wu lun* (five hierarchical relationships). Each individual is expected to behave according to rank and social status. In the Confucian paradigm, the hierarchical relationships

between subordination and superiority dictate performance of assigned duties, loyalty and reciprocity.

4.1.3. Varied vs. fast-track

Career rhythm refers to the flow and tempo of their career advancement. It can be fast-tracked (Tripp and Kang, 2008), slow (Foster et al., 2011), or stagnant. The career rhythm demonstrates career advancing traits from both time and effect dimensions, which can be an important predictor of career success. The results showed that upper echelon women studied in this research showed a varied pattern of career rhythm. One interviewee reported:

> *In general, I never deliberately planned my career path. I started to work at a very young age and every stage of career took quite a long time. I have been deputy director for 9 years and then director for 9 years and then director general for more than 10 years. All in all, I have worked for more than 40 years and I am not like others who are promoted every other 3 or 4 years. They are like trotting in quick steps and I am like walking step by step* (Interviewee 18).

This distinct zigzag pattern at times is in sharp contrast to the conventional wisdom for career advancement. For example, previous research suggested a more proactive approach taken by female executives with an emphasis on networking, taking the initiative toward developmental opportunities, taking risks in their careers and being on a fast-track (Lyness and Thompson, 2000; Ng and Pine, 2003). The zigzag pattern of career advancement revealed in the trajectories of the upper echelon women studied in this research is likely a reflection of cultural conditioning, suggesting the Confucius values and women's gender role in such beliefs, especially as they relate to group orientation, hierarchy and time orientation (Wang et al., 2005).

4.1.4. The influence of maternity

Maternity has been considered a major obstacle to female career advancement in addition to the demands of marriage and household responsibilities (Görlich and De Grip, 2008). The data indicated that the informants tended to have a high tolerance for the time needed to advance and for the setbacks inherent to gender-related life experiences such as maternity. One general manager stated:

> *Marriage and childbearing are not necessarily bad things for career. Some women even take full advantage of this stage to make smooth career transitions. Some women retreat to bear children after being promoted, some women take advantage of this maternity period to grow more mature, responsible, amiable or to learn new knowledge and skills at home. However, most female employees may lose promotion opportunities due to maternity. Gold will glitter finally, as long as you are capable enough and have a right value and attitude toward work. It is possible for you to re-launch your career after the childbearing* (Interviewee 4).

4.2. Work-life harmony over work-life balance

While the upper echelon women studied in this research showed a culturally-influenced and gendered approach to career advancement, it is in the life domain that such conditioning is most distinctive and showed greater difference from the conventional wisdom for career women in the Western context. Specifically, the informants tended to downplay the work-life/family conflicts and tried to harmonize (as opposed to balance) the work and life/family domains — a mindset and approach very characteristic of the Confucius doctrine of harmony. We labeled this approach as *work-life harmony* in contrast to the prevailing concept of work-life balance. Interestingly and seemingly paradoxically, the informants appeared to prefer *work and life/family segregation* as the means to achieve the goal of work-life harmony.

4.2.1. Work-life harmony

One somewhat surprising theme that emerged from this study was that the upper echelon women interviewed in this study tended not to present career and life/family as conflicts and balancing acts. Rather, informants expressed a strong desire to treat career and life/family domains as integral and non-competing parts of their life experiences. We label this approach as *work-life harmony*. This mindset and approach can be traced to the collectivist ideology of Confucianism teaching that family is the basic unit of society and family is embedded in the society (Li et al., 2000). The following quotes reflect such a mindset:

> *I did not feel there are clear conflicts and contradictions between family and career. I believe work efficiency is quite important. In the past, people emphasize selfless devotion. However, I have always felt that family and work are equally important* (Interviewee 18).

> *I think my family has not affected my career development. I always strive for high productivity at work and try to go back home at six o'clock to ensure that I spend time with my children each night before they go to bed* (Interviewee 14).

4.2.2. Preference for work-life segregation

In their quest for work-life harmony, informants in this study displayed a strong preference for work-life segregation, keeping distinctive identities at work and home without much attempt to reconcile the two identities. The women in this study shared that they assumed distinctive roles in their personal and professional lives. For example, informants reported that they accepted the conventional role and responsibilities as a wife and a mother at home while presenting the role as upper echelon at work.

> *I did all what women should do. Finally, my husband was very moved, and even said to give me a hand in my work and housework. Of course, I never bothered my husband about who did more in taking care of our kids or doing the housework* (Interviewee 13).

> *I did household cleaning every Saturday. When my son was a little boy, it also happened to be the critical period for my career advancement. My mother took care of him when I was at work. I usually would go home after work to spend time with my son, and sometimes talk to him about my work. Sometimes I had to work overtime, but no matter how late it was, I always tried my best to go home to say good night to my son and have breakfast together the next day* (Interviewee 8).

The data analysis showed that this was made possible by treating home and work as two different spheres. This is demonstrated in the following quote:

> *I think I have a clear plan for my life and I indeed have made certain arrangements for my family and work. I think that my family has not affected my career development. …. Usually I can do all the work before I go back home. If there is still unfinished work, I will go to work earlier the next day* (Interviewee 14).

The distinctive pattern of achieving work-life harmony through work-life segregation is likely rooted in the traditional *nei-wai* binary in China, a gender-based boundary and division of responsibilities where *nei* literally means inside and refers to the private and domestic sphere that is considered as women's responsibilities while *wai* signifies the outside world that is a public and societal realm that is dominated by men (Fangqin, 2020). While the *nei-wai* binary may appear to treat home and work as mutually opposing and conflicting spheres, Confucius doctrine does not portray these as two separate realms. Rather, family is the foundation upon which a harmonious state can be achieved (Jiang, 2019). Through this lens, the culturally-conditioned and gendered approach to achieve work-life harmony thorough work-life segregation is not surprising and seems to reconcile.

4.3. A silk-and-steel androgynous approach to leadership

This study also aimed to explore how cultural underpinnings shape their philosophy and approach to leadership. The data analysis revealed that the upper echelon women interviewed in this study readily acknowledged gender as a basis to categorize leadership traits, which is in stark contrast to the prevailing thinking in the Western context that tends to discourage gender-based classifications. Furthermore, the informants elaborated on their gendered approach to leadership strategies and tactics.

4.3.1. Gendered and socially desirable leadership attributes

Results of the data analysis indicate that informants readily *acknowledge* there were differences between upper echelon women and their male counterparts. Table 2 shows the results of word frequency analysis using the informant narratives to examine their perception of gender differences. It suggests that most informants acknowledged the differences between male and female managers predominantly in personality traits. Compared with their male counterparts, they described themselves as *easy-going, hard-working, amiable, energetic, optimistic, perseverant, honest, tolerant, self-disciplined, responsible, prudent,* and *detail-oriented* regarding their advantageous personal traits. On the other hand, they described themselves as *indecisive, passive, unconfident, less creative,* and *lack of divergent thinking* regarding their disadvantageous traits. One notable finding was that seven informants emphasized their superb silk-and-steel style of leadership abilities. On one hand, upper echelon women believed that they should demonstrate leadership traits that are traditionally associated with men. On the other hand, influenced by traditional role expectations, they wanted to show their family-orientation to be consistent with social role expectations and their own internalized female role expectations. The results appear to confirm the assertion by performative theories of gender that many women voluntarily seek to portray socially desirable and female-appropriate images (Ussher, 1997), even if they hold important positions in companies similar to men.

4.3.2. A silk-and-steel androgynous approach to leadership

When asked about gender and leadership, informants tended to endorse an androgynous leadership style (Bem, 1974) that combines agentic (e.g., assertive, confident) and communal (e.g., considerate, amiable) characteristics. The informants appeared to deliberately attempt a steel-and-silk androgynous approach to leadership and leverage gender differences to maximize advantages and minimize disadvantages in their progression to top positions, as shown in the following quotes:

Table 2
Main coding subcategories of "gender differences" from the data.

Coding subcategories	Frequency	Coding subcategories	Frequency
Responsible for job	13	Detail-oriented	5
Good at communication	11	Traditional	5
More pressure	8	Less divergent thinking	4
Self-disciplined	8	Complaint solving	4
Modest about their competence	7	Emotional	4
Enterprising	7	Meticulous	4
Considerate	6	Not confident in their competence	4
Serious	6	Prudent	4
Tolerant	6	Earnest	4
Good interpersonal skills	6	Coordinative	4
Exquisite	6	Rule keeper, less innovative	4
Indecisive	6	More suitable for the industry	3
Less suitable for the top positions	6	Honest	3
Not utilitarian	5	Strong executive force	3

At first male members of our team felt embarrassed to have a female boss. But after some time, they are very willing to work with me. Actually, compared with an all-male group, we are more harmonious because men speak in a direct way and have direct confrontation, while women pay more attention to their way of speaking and are more considerate in handling details. Therefore, our group is very harmonious. (Interviewee 1).

I think women are natural communicators, because they tend to be more sensitive and tolerant. Social relationships among guests, employees and suppliers are quite important in tourism and hospitality businesses. In this regard, I do think women have an advantage (Interviewee 11).

Informants in this study reported to absorb favorable agentic traits at work such as strong-minded, logical, decisive, and confident to create a more professional image while maintaining feminine charms such as considerate, amiable, easy-going, and tolerant, hence creating a more socially desirable image to both corporate and the public, as illustrated in the quotes below:

It is necessary to maintain the charm of being a woman and take advantage of it in one's career. But one can neither be too sensual, nor careless about their appearance. That means it should be a perfect combination of professionalism and femininity (Interviewee 15).

I always maintain a principle that, no matter what position I am in, I should never lose touch with my feminine side, because I am a woman. Maybe you don't agree with me, but I really don't want to see women becoming more and more masculine when they ascend to higher positions. I think that is terrible. Why should we be man-like even if we have to work with them all the time? (Interviewee 6)

One distinctive and consistent pattern emerged from this study was informants' ready acknowledgment of gender differences at work. This is in stark contrast to the Western view of gender difference as sexism and gender discrimination in the workplace. The contrast may be traced to deeply rooted gender distinctions in the Chinese traditional culture such as the *yin-yang* metaphor, the *nei-wai* distinction, and the gender-specific virtues *san cong si de* discussed earlier in the article.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The hospitality and tourism industry has some challenging working conditions such as long hours, limited promotion and development opportunities, family-work conflicts and need to relocation (Dashper, 2020; Mooney et al., 2016). In addition to these industry-related obstacles, Chinese female executives also face culture-related challenges and strong traditional gender role expectations. While previous studies provide directions and implications for systematic changes to empower women, the thriving of the women who "made it" requires better understanding. To that end, the current study explored the lived experience of thriving in career and life by the upper echelon women leaders in the hospitality and tourism industry in China and uncovered some unique gendered and culturally conditioned approaches such women leaders took to career and life.

The findings show that the upper echelon women studied in this research took a somewhat reactive and emergent approach to career advancement characterized by lateral moves and a zigzag pattern of career rhythm. The finding is consistent with the study of Woodhams, Xian, and Lupton (Woodhams et al., 2015) indicating Chinese women viewed their path to management as "unplanned and reactive" (p. 920). It can also be partially attributed to a collectivism culture that prioritizes collective goals over individual interests. In addition, Confucianism's time orientation is likely embedded in the Chinese upper echelon women's approaches to career advancement. A somewhat surprising finding is that the informants expressed a mindset that maternity was not necessarily a hurdle for them for two reasons: the time to reflect and learn for self-development and the spillover effect of their motherhood

into management at work. It is a somewhat refreshing mindset in that previous studies show that pregnancy and maternity are predominantly viewed as major barriers to career growth due to reduced availability and flexibility for women at work (Carvalho et al., 2019). In the current study, informants showed a culture-influenced approach to manage the two realms of life and career, and expressed a mindset that when adapting a longer time orientation, temporal pause in their career may bring benefits in the long-term.

One of the most distinctive and theoretically rich findings from this study is that the upper echelon women preferred to achieve work-life harmony through work-life segregation. It is well documented that work-life conflict has been one of the key barriers for women's career advancement (Li and Leung, 2001) and achieving work-life balance is critical (Costa et al., 2017; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). The subtle yet decidedly distinctive emphasis on work-life harmony (as opposed to work-life balance) revealed in this study is both theoretically interesting and culturally profound. Harmony is a major philosophy in Confucianism ranging from internal harmony within a person to harmony in the family, society and the external world (Li, 2008). This philosophy conditioned informants in this study to approach the conflicts between work and life as two domains that require harmonizing as opposed to balancing, interestingly, through work-life separation as opposed to work-life integration. At first glance, achieving work-life harmony through work-life separation may appear contradictory. However, a closer look at the phenomenon links it to cultural roots. The concept of *nei-wai* (inner-outer) is one of the most culturally influential Confucius notions that prescribe the normative gender-based division of labor and functional distinction and boundary between home and society in which the *nei* (home) is believed to be the realm for women and *wai* (outside work) the domain for men. Therefore, it is conceivable for women in such a cultural environment to consider the work-life relationship as boundary expanding, less about conflict resolution or balancing. It is important to note that the objective of this study was to explore the upper echelon women's lived experience of thriving in such a cultural context, rather than examine the phenomenon through the lens of sexism or gender discrimination, which can obviously lead to a different set of observations and conclusions.

The findings also show that the informants readily acknowledge gender differences and deliberately leverage leadership traits traditionally associated with women to be more effective in their leadership roles. This finding is noteworthy in that previous studies have documented the phenomenon that female executives often attempt to adjust their leadership styles to resemble their male counterparts to perform the role of leaders in the male-dominated organizations in the hospitality industry (Dashper, 2020; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019). A few studies, however, found that female managers were perceived favorable on traits such as caring, empathy, better communication, and multitasking (Costa et al., 2017). Recently, a few studies began to shed light on strategies female executives implement to advance their careers, such as establishing their own styles to maximize the effect of the feminine traits rather than forcing themselves to obtain masculine traits (Guillet et al., 2019; Liu and Li, 2020). In particular, the discrepancy of gender roles and expectations at work and at home reinforce female managers to make extra effort, but not necessarily to focus on challenging the existing gender norms (Liu and Li, 2020). The gendered approach to leadership appears to be particularly salient in the Asian context (e.g., Liu and Li, 2020). One revealing finding from this research is that informants repeatedly cited certain traits as female leadership traits and the acute self-consciousness led to deliberate utilization of such traits to create a leadership style that informants considered as effective, culturally desirable and in tune with their inner selves.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to women's career advancement and leadership literature in several significant and meaningful ways. First, this

study illuminates the subjective experiences of thriving of upper echelon individuals in their career and lives. Previous studies predominantly approached the career of women at an aggregated level and tended to offer snapshots of the status of female leaders in a corporate environment (e.g., Boone et al., 2013). Thus, it is somewhat of a black box as to how female leaders at individual levels negotiate among the opportunities, barriers, and challenges they face within their daily personal and professional lives. Based on the personal narratives of the individuals, this study sheds light into the *process* of the female path to an upward career trajectory. This study not only identifies what these women face in their immediate personal and professional environment, but also reveals the mindset, approaches and strategies they employ to climb the corporate ladder. One of the primary findings indicates that upper echelon women in the hospitality and tourism industry in China have a different mindset toward life and career compared to what has been suggested from previous studies using a Western context. The work-life harmony approach they took has led these women not to treat work-life as a dilemma that competes with each other but harmonize the two by paradoxically compartmentalizing the two pillars and tackling each based on different role expectations.

Second, this study offers a positive perspective of female career advancement by focusing on women thriving in their professional lives. Previous studies tended to depict women as passive actors weighed down with many organizational, societal, and cultural environmental challenges that give women less control (Boone et al., 2013). This study, however, offers a perspective of how upper echelon women have thrived in their career by demonstrating their gender and culture-aware strategies and approaches to career advancement. An individual's positive perspective and accountability for their thoughts and actions are essential to optimal physical, mental, and social functioning (Su et al., 2014). Thriving is a benchmark for people to appraise what and how they do, and thus, it enables individuals to be more effective by enhancing individual functioning in the short-term as well as resourcefulness in the long-term (Spreitzer and Porath, 2014). By emphasizing unique approaches and strategies taken by upper echelon women who have thrived in their career, this study offers a "thriving" perspective to the existing literature which predominantly focuses on internal and external barriers in women's career advancement.

Last, this study offers a balanced view of the role that gender differences play in female career development. Previous studies tended to be silent on female gender qualities or gender differences as these qualities were considered as weaknesses in advancing the career of women and their performance in a leadership role in a corporate environment (Pizam, 2017). Contrary to this traditional treatment of gender differences, this study shows that upper echelon female executives in China approach female qualities and gender differences as an endowment rather than a handicap. These women embrace gender differences between male and female leaders and do not treat qualities traditionally associated with women as weaknesses they should overcome. Rather, they utilized these qualities as their strengths and leveraged them to their advantage.

5.2. Practical implications

This study also offers several important practical implications for women in the current or future workforce, organizations, and higher education institutions in the field of tourism and hospitality management, particularly in Asian countries with cultural traditions steeped in Confucianism. First, the findings of this study show that, while thriving in both career and life is undeniably challenging, aspiring career women should not be discouraged to the point of considering it entirely unattainable. Informants shared that they perceived their career and family as two separate pillars of life and strive to harmonize their career and life/family by constructing two separate identities, one for at home and one for at work. Their distinctive mindset toward career and life leads to unique approaches in navigating both, including creating a clear

boundary between work and life/family. It is important to acknowledge that the women in this study did have access to more financial resources and support in their lives to facilitate these chosen approaches. However, their gendered and cultured harmonizing approach to work and life/family still has much relevance to other career women, particularly in cultures with a strong Confucian influence.

Second, the study findings can be used to guide women to leverage gender differences to their benefit at work. In traditional gender and occupation research, gender differences, particularly female qualities, tend to be perceived as a handicap to being a successful leader (e.g., Eagly and Karau, 2002). The purposive gendered approach taken by the informants in this study is informative. For example, gentle and harmonious traits are reflected in their communication style which benefits these upper echelon women on managing staff or work teams. With detail-oriented and responsible qualities, they tend to be more effective in dealing with ethical issues and problem-solving that contribute to company development.

Third, the study findings can help organizations in the similar sociocultural context examined in this study to better understand the unique orientation and strategies of female workers and thus more effectively facilitate female workforce career advancement by establishing a climate to foster their success. For example, these findings reveal that upper echelon women focus on an emergent approach, which indicates they have a tendency to expect opportunities to be offered to them as opposed to compete for them. Knowing this behavioral tendency, organizations can be more proactive in identifying promising women executives and grooming them to commensurate positions, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach to talent development.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

There are several limitations associated with this study. The study findings cannot be generalized beyond the study context. Due to the cultural influence (e.g., Confucianism), there may be variations in expectations and responsibilities for multiple roles in the given society (Sanchez-Hucles and Davis, 2010). Thus, the approaches and strategies of upper echelon women toward their personal and professional lives may vary based on culture. Cross-cultural examination would be useful in validating the study results or examining the unique influence of culture. In addition, as some informants shared in this study, the career advancement of women may be largely influenced by personal traits rather than gender. Thus, identifying the profiles of upper echelon women related to their personal traits could be useful in advancing female career advancement and female leadership literature.

5.4. Conclusion

This study took a qualitative approach to explore the lived experience of thriving by a sample of twenty-one upper echelon women executives in the tourism and hospitality industry in China. We used the term 'silk and steel' to define the distinctive gendered approach emerged in their narratives to bring together the mindsets, patterns and strategies these women displayed in navigating career, life/family and leadership issues in a society deeply rooted in Confucian traditions. Throughout their careers and lives, women seemed to have perfected the art of blending the 'silk' part of themselves – the traditional gender roles, traits and expectations in a society with a strong Confucian cultural undertone, with the 'steel' element – the prototypical leadership roles, traits and expectations heavily colored by the long-time male dominated society. This article depicts the seemingly paradoxical yet harmonious gendered and acculturated silk-and-steel approach taken by the women executives in the study to overcome barriers and obstacles that are societal, cultural, organizational and personal to achieve optimal functioning and thriving in a current world that still leaves much to be desired for women.

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