Career and life expectations of Chinese business students: the effects of gender

Carol A. McKeen and Nailin Bu

The authors

Carol A. McKeen is Associate Professor within the School of Business, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada.
Nailin Bu is Assistant Professor and is also based at the School of Business, Kingston, Canada.

Abstract

The career and life expectations of male and female Chinese students and graduates of the Certified General Accountants (CGA) Canada program in China were explored using a survey and semi-structured interviews. The results of the survey were compared to data from students of a leading Canadian business school. Chinese students of both sexes show a much higher level of commitment to their careers than their Canadian counterparts. Despite this commitment, their qualifications, and the critical shortage of professionally trained people in China, female Chinese students are pessimistic about their prospects for career advancement. They cite negative stereotypes, lack of mentors and role models, isolation, and a lack of organizational policies enabling them to successfully fulfill their parental roles as major barriers. This is consistent with the North American literature on the "glass ceiling."

Introduction

The successful retention and integration of educated women into all levels of the organizational hierarchy has been an issue of concern for organizations in industrialized nations for several years. The "glass ceiling" facing managerial and professional women in the West has been well documented (Evetts, 1994; Fagenson, 1993; Morrison *et al.*, 1987). Strober *et al.* (1992) hypothesize that it results from the interaction of four mutually reinforcing factors: organizational structures and procedures, male executives' beliefs and behaviors, female executives' beliefs and behaviors and the family system (see Figure 1).

China's economic reform initiatives have generated spectacular results, with gross domestic product growing at an average annual rate of approximately 10 per cent for nearly two decades since 1978 (Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, 1996). Continuing growth in China will require the full utilization of the potential of all the professional and managerial talents which are currently in severe shortage (Borgonjon and Vanhonacker, 1992; Lockett, 1988; Warner, 1992). For example, in China there is an immediate shortage of 40,000 professionally trained accountants, with a current supply of 10,000 and an anticipated demand of 100,000 by the end of the century (CGA-Canada, 1996b). The role of women in filling this demand is critical, as they comprise almost 60 per cent of the students in post-secondary accounting programs in China (CGA Canada, 1997).

China has one of the highest labor force participation rates for women in the world - 70 per cent of working-age women in China compared to 49 per cent in Canada, 50 per cent in the USA and 46 per cent in the UK (United Nations, 1995). The education of women has also improved drastically in China, with the enrollment of females in post-secondary education increasing tenfold in the last 50 years. However, China still lags behind

Figure 1 Mutually reinforcing circles that exclude women from the executive suite
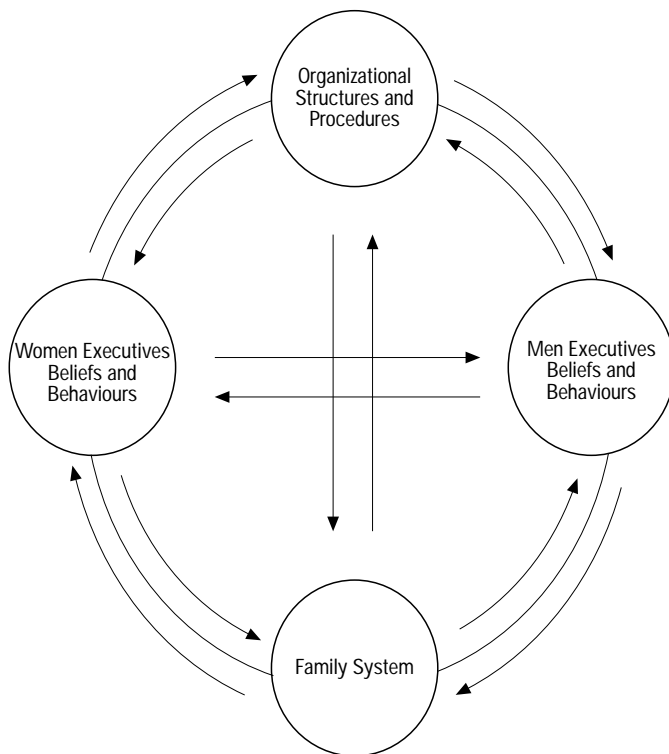
Source: Strober, M.H., Bradford, D.L., Jackman, J.M. (1992)

Western industrialized countries in the university education of women and in their integration into all levels of organizations. In fact, as recently as 1994, despite the rapid improvements, still only half as many women as men were enrolled in China's post-secondary education compared to Canada, the USA and the UK where the women constitute 56 per cent, 55 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively, of the university students. In the West, although men and women have been graduating in relatively equal numbers from universities, they have not achieved equivalent organizational success. Organizations in the West are still in the process of learning how to deconstruct the glass ceiling and make the most of the talents of their managerial and professional women. Work and family policies, part-time career tracks, gender awareness training, formal mentoring programs, succession planning and sexual harassment policies are just a few of the initiatives undertaken to make organizations more hospitable to women. Although complete success in this area has not yet been obtained (Gerkovich Griffith *et al.*, 1997), organizations in the West have made considerable progress.

Will Chinese women's career experience resemble that of their Western counterparts? According to convergence theory, values, institutions and practices existing in Western industrialized nations today will emerge in developing nations, including China, as these countries industrialize (England and Lee, 1974). Conversely, the proponents of divergence theory believe that the emerging organizational issues in developing nations will differ substantially from those experienced in the industrialized nations despite the process of industrialization because of the enduring influence of cultural traditions (Lincoln *et al.*, 1978; Ricks *et al.*, 1990). Most likely, as suggested by Ralston and associates (Ralston *et al.*, 1993, 1997), both converging and diverging processes operate to various extents depending on the specific issues of concern. We therefore believe that organizations in China striving to design policies to retain and motivate their female workforces will face a series of issues, some of which are similar to those faced by their Western counterparts with others which are unique to the Chinese context.

This study, by comparing career and life expectations of female and male Chinese Certified General Accountant (CGA) students with their Canadian counterparts, explores specific areas of similarities and differences between Chinese and North American settings with respect to the issues facing young professional women. To determine whether it is likely that a glass ceiling will emerge in organizations in China as it has in North America and the potential factors contributing to it, we use Strober *et al.*'s (1992) model and examine the beliefs and behaviors of the Chinese executives of tomorrow – male and female business students. We focus specifically on their expectations and hopes about their careers and future families and gender roles. We also ask them about the organizational structures and policies which they believe will be necessary to them to ensure their career success. The family and cultural factors affecting these hopes and expectations as well as the current organizational responses to these issues are also explored.

Method

Sample
This study consists of a survey administered to Chinese business students, as well as

semi-structured interviews conducted with a subsample of those students and some recent graduates. Our research focusses on students who are enrolled in, and those who are recent graduates of, the CGA Canada's program of professional studies in China. The students and graduates of this program are of particular interest for the study of gender issues because 59 per cent of them are women. The CGA Canada program was introduced in 1993 with financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency to meet the rapidly increasing demand for accountants in China. In contrast to Canada, where they are taught on a correspondence basis, CGA courses in China are delivered at the university, and most Chinese CGA students receive their CGA designation in conjunction with a business degree. The program is offered at six Chinese universities and all courses for the CGA designation are delivered in English (CGA-Canada, 1996a). By 1997, 20 Chinese students (13 women and seven men) had received CGA designations. The 328 students actively enrolled in the CGA program in China in the winter of 1997 were invited to participate in the survey. The survey was translated into Mandarin and distributed through the six universities in China in which the CGA program operates. In order to further investigate the Chinese students' views on the issues addressed in the survey as well as other effects that culture and gender might play in their lives, we travelled to Beijing and Shanghai in June of 1997 to interview ten women and six men who were either current CGA students or CGA graduates of the University of International Business and Economics, Fudan University, or the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics. In these hour-long semi-structured interviews, the interviewees were asked about their employment prospects, career goals and expectations, and about balancing work and family. We also interviewed senior human resource professionals at some of the large multinational accounting firms' subsidiaries in China which employ the graduates.

Data from Canadian business students and graduates of comparable age and gender composition are available for several of the measures included in the survey in China, and are used for cross-cultural comparison purposes. These Canadian data were collected as part of an ongoing stream of research to understand the role of gender in the career and life expectations of Canadian Business School graduates (Beatty et al., 1992; McKeen and Bujaki, 1998) [1].

Survey measures
In the survey questionnaire, the demographic characteristics of respondents were assessed by a variety of single-item measures including age, years in program, marital status, other degrees, presence of children, and employment history. To measure general life expectations, respondents were asked to consider their marital, parental and employment status five and ten years in the future and to anticipate work and family conflict. Importance of various life roles was measured in a number of ways. The life roles salience scale (LRSS) (Amatea et al., 1986) assesses respondents' role value and role commitment relating to four major life roles: occupational, marital, parental and homecare. The LRSS consists of four ten-item scales, each focussing on one of the four life roles. Each scale is composed of two subscales, one measuring the value of the particular role to the respondent (five items), and the other measuring his/her commitment to it (five items). Each scale item is a five-point Likert scale, asking respondents to rate their extent of agreement or disagreement with a statement. The respondents were also asked to consider their lives five and ten years in the future with respect to allocation of time among paid work, household responsibilities and leisure. Another measure asked for the most likely reasons for respondents to interrupt their careers in the future.

The respondents' expectations with respect to gender roles were measured by a variety of single items. To measure their hopes and expectations with respect to future marriage or marriage-like relationships, we asked them to consider both what they hoped would happen and what they believed would actually happen with respect to the following items: sharing of household and childcare duties between spouses; and their spouses' employment, earnings and prestige of employment relative to their own. To assess what these educated young people would need from their employing organizations to help them develop more satisfying and productive careers, they were asked to rate the importance of 32 organizational initiatives on 5-point Likert scales.

Results

The results of the survey and the interviews are presented in the following categories: demographics, general life expectations, the importance of various life roles, career expectations, gender roles, and the importance of organizational initiatives. For each of these categories we present the results of the survey in China, and, where applicable, comparable Canadian data, as well as what we learned from the interviews in China.

Demographics

A total of 160 completed surveys was returned by the Chinese students, yielding a response rate of 48.8 per cent. Among the respondents, 57.4 per cent were women, 72 per cent were full-time students, 22 per cent were working full-time, and the remainder were working part-time and attending school part-time. They were on average 21.8 years of age, 9 per cent were married, and three males reported having children. Thirty per cent had some full-time work experience.

General life expectations

Chinese students' general life expectations obtained in our survey are presented in comparison with Canadian data from 117 final year undergraduate students at a leading Canadian Business School collected by Beatty *et al.* (1992). The Canadian sample matched the Chinese sample in terms of average age (21.5 years) and gender composition (57.3 per cent women). The response rate for the Canadian sample was somewhat higher at 57.9 per cent. In answer to questions about their lives five and ten years in the future, 30 per cent of Chinese women and 49 per cent of Chinese men expected to be married within five years, however, in ten years this rose to 71 per cent of Chinese women and 83 per cent of Chinese men. Within five years, fewer than 25 per cent of Chinese students expected to have children, however in ten years 54 per cent of Chinese women and 66 per cent of Chinese men expected to be parents. Female and male students we surveyed in China were equally prepared to pursue an active career (based on $X2$ tests). Eighty-eight per cent of them expected to be working full-time five years after their graduation, 83 per cent expected to be working full time ten years after graduation, and 50 per cent of the students were quite certain that they will work full time

without interruption until retirement. When asked to anticipate the ease of managing career and family, only 30 per cent of Chinese believed it would be difficult.

In comparison to the Chinese students, more of the Canadian students of both sexes expected to be married in five years (65 per cent) and in ten years (92 per cent). Like their Chinese counterparts, fewer than 25 per cent of the Canadian students expected to be parents within five years, however within ten years more Canadians (78 per cent) expected that to occur. When asked to contemplate their careers in the future, 97 per cent of both Canadian women and men expected to be working full-time five years after graduation, and in ten years, 89 per cent of the Canadian women and 100 per cent of the Canadian men reported this expectation. Only 8 per cent of the Canadian women and 34 per cent of the Canadian men foresaw working full time until retirement. Furthermore, 75 per cent of Canadian students of both sexes reported believing that managing work and family in the future would be difficult.

Because of the one child policy in China and the tradition of the provision of childcare by the grandparents and other extended family members, we also explored the impact of parenthood in more depth during the interviews. It was clear that the women expected that the arrival of their one child would have a significant impact upon their careers but not their husbands'. Most expected to take between two months and one year out of the workforce before returning full time, however, they also expected that they would suffer a loss of promotion and that they would be permanently held back in their careers. As one female graduate working for one of the multinational accounting firms said about having a baby, "I think it will have a big impact on your permanent career. I feel angry but it is useless." One reported that her classmate had borne a child and did not get promoted. As she told us, "they don't tell you that this is the reason, but you can feel it." Another who had recently changed jobs reflected her anxiety over the apparent conflict between her career and parenthood. She had been married three years and expressed her concern about her new employer in the following way: "If I have a baby maybe this company won't promote me. I feel it, it's the environment." This was in contrast to her former employer (a state-owned company),

where she felt it would be more acceptable for her to have a child and that she would not suffer career consequences as a result. Their concerns about the difficulty of meeting the demands of full-time work and family and appearing to remain committed to careers once they had a child were modeled in their organizations since they reported that none of the few women in senior management positions had children.

Importance of various life roles
From our survey we discovered that Chinese students of both sexes attached more importance to their occupational role than Canadian students in Beatty *et al.*'s (1992) study, and would devote more of their time and energy to it. Table I summarizes the responses of Chinese and Canadian students to the life role salience scale (LRSS), which assesses individuals' views regarding four life roles (occupational, parental, marital and homecare). Hotelling's T^2 and subsequent Dunn-Bonferroni multiple *t* comparisons indicated that the occupational and parental roles were considered by the Chinese students, male and female, as being of most importance. Although, overall, the Chinese students' willingness to commit time and energy to their occupational role was unsurpassed by that of any other life roles, a gender difference was found. While male students clearly prioritized among various life roles in allocating their time and energy, with occupational and marital roles at the top and the home care role

at the bottom, female students attempted to balance their time and energy across all four life roles. In contrast, Canadian students ranked their occupational role as least important and least likely to get their time and energy.

The students' views about life balance were further explored by asking them their expected allocation of the 112 working hours per week among paid work, household responsibility and leisure in five and ten years after their graduation. Since no significant difference between genders was uncovered in this respect, only the aggregate data are reported. During the first five years after graduation, the Chinese students' expected time allocation for paid work, house work and leisure was 57.0, 21.0 and 34.0 hours per week respectively, while that of Canadian students was lower at 51.5, 19.0 and 41.4 hours per week (Beatty *et al.*, 1992). In the next five years after graduation (i.e. years six through ten), the expected time allocation among paid work, housework and leisure changed to 50.6, 24.9, and 36.5 hours per week among the Chinese students, and to 45.9, 23.5 and 42.6 among the Canadian students (Beatty *et al.*, 1992). A series of *t* tests showed that students in both countries anticipated significantly shortened work hours after the first five years of their employment to leave time for heavier household responsibilities and more leisure activities. However, throughout the whole ten year period considered, Chinese students were prepared to allocate significantly more

Table I Life role salience scale: comparison of Chinese and Canadian business students

| | China | | Canada[a] | |
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Occupational role value	19.75	19.15	17.85	17.60
Occupational role commitment	17.95	17.50	17.70	16.65
Parental role value	20.15	19.80	21.55	20.75
Parental role commitment	17.15	16.60	20.20	17.75
Marital role value	18.95	18.00	19.60	18.25
Marital role commitment	17.55	17.00	20.65	19.50
Home care role value	18.90	17.65	19.50	18.55
Home care role commitment	16.50	17.00	18.30	17.80

Notes:
Data in each cell are the sum of the scores on five items. Each item is scored on a five-point Likert scale measuring extent of agreement with a statement regarding the importance of or commitment to a certain life role (1 = disagreement, 5 = agreement). The maximum score for each cell is therefore 25 representing total agreement
[a] Data obtained from Beatty *et al.* (1992)

time to work and less time to household responsibilities and to leisure activities than their Canadian counterparts. Chinese students of both sexes anticipated that the most likely reason for them to interrupt their careers was to further their education. The second most likely reason was to search for alternative career options. For Canadian students, furthering their education came in second, after travel for men and to have or care for children for women (Beatty *et al.*, 1992).

These survey findings were reinforced during the interviews. As an example of their interest in and commitment to their careers, students often expressed a desire for frequent promotion or some other recognition of their professional development. For example, one of the first female CGA graduates had recently left a job in an accounting firm where she had been employed for five years to work for a multinational because of the rapid promotion opportunities. She was unwilling to wait two years for a promotional opportunity at her previous employer. Although one might speculate that salaries would be significantly higher at a multinational firm, this graduate focussed entirely on the promotional opportunities at her new job as the reason for leaving. "I can be a department manager in two years (at my old job) but I can't wait so long." One of the male graduates who also was the most senior Chinese at a multinational petrochemical company had recently switched jobs because of the opportunity to become the controller of another multinational within six months. We were left with little doubt about the willingness of Chinese students to change employers to avail themselves of promotion opportunities.

Career expectations

The career expectations of the women and men in China were explored in some depth in the interviews. The students were asked about their expectations for themselves and for their colleagues of the same and the opposite sex. Both men and women expressed the view that the women were at least as competent and hardworking as the men. As one of the male students said, "The women are very smart and besides they are very hard-working – they are even more hard-working than we are – sometimes they even get higher scores than we do." Another noted that "many women want challenge and opportunities." However, the

men seemed optimistic and sure they (the men) would succeed whereas the women were hesitant about the success they would achieve. As one of the men expressed it; "Nothing will get in the way (of my success) if I work hard." In contrast one of the most successful female graduates believed that being a woman "is a potential problem." Even those women who were not yet employed revealed this hesitation when speaking about job opportunities. One noted that companies prefer to hire men but they are desperate so they hire women – "they hire men because they don't have babies." Another added, "I feel angry. When a company is recruiting, if you and a man are equal or even if you are better, they will choose the man … I have heard women say that their hard work is not appreciated." Commenting on the initial hiring of male and female graduates, a female graduate currently working at one of the multinational accounting firms said, " … most of the new hires here are women – men go to finance – it has more prestige." A common expectation among the women, particularly those employed by large multinational accounting firms, was that they would be limited in their opportunities simply because they were women, and they had already decided that they would leave before that limitation was to become a reality. One told us that it would be highly unlikely for a local woman ever to become a partner in a multinational accounting firm and that the women learned this informal rule after they accepted employment and were disappointed; however, they believed this was the case everywhere. As a more senior woman graduate with one of the large firms observed about the turnover among the female staff, "They (the management of the firm) have a short view, they spend a lot of money on training (and then their investment is lost).". Another woman said; "When women are 30 they (the firm) think you will marry and that you will not concentrate on work and they will not give you some opportunities they will give to your male colleagues." She went on to say that because of this, the women would look for new jobs about two years after being hired– "they are happy to leave." The men we interviewed also believed that the women would not succeed to the same extent as they would – "it is harder for women than men … maybe if they have a baby they have a problem." Another told us "even if she has the same level of knowledge and credibility it is more

difficult for her to get the same job (as I can get)." One indicated that in his company, a large multinational, 90 per cent of the people in the routine accounting jobs were women whereas the men were more likely to be in the majority in other fields such as organizational information systems. Yet another told us "auditing is more suitable for females … they are more patient and more careful . . . men cannot stand such a boring job."

The women offered many thoughts about the difficulties facing them. They all noticed that there were few or no women at senior levels of organizations and that even fewer have children. The predominantly male power structure in organizations presented a problem for the women: "It's a problem because your superiors are usually men and they will socialize with men." Many of the women and men told us that mixed sex socializing at events such as bowling and karaoke were common among organizational members at their level; however, they did observe that there were activities, mostly sports, which male colleagues engaged in with only the other men in the office. Many of the women resisted the idea that they would need to get to know more senior people in their own organizations and to develop relationships with them in order to succeed. As one woman said, "I don't like it and I won't do it." They preferred to operate under the assumption that their organizations are pure meritocracies in which all that is required to advance is hard work.

Gender roles

Further restriction on women's success in China was found in the respondents' hopes and beliefs about the future employment status of their spouses and the relative prestige of the jobs and earnings of husbands and wives. Table II presents Chinese male and female respondents' hope and beliefs with respect to their partners' career relative to their own in comparison with the Canadian business students studied by Beatty *et al.,* (1992). Virtually all of the women in both countries hoped and actually believed that their spouses would work full time; however, the men in the two countries showed dramatically different patterns from the women and from one another. Two-thirds of Canadian men hoped that their wives would work full-time but only 50 per cent of them believed this would happen. Conversely, while over 80 per

cent of the Chinese men actually believed their wives would work full time, only 56 per cent hoped this would happen. The majority of Canadian women and men (83 per cent and 68 per cent) hoped for jobs with prestige equal to their spouses'; however, only approximately half believed this would actually occur. The remainder believed the men would have more prestigious jobs. Seventy per cent of Chinese men and 50 per cent of Chinese women hoped this would occur; however, only half of both sexes actually believed that this would occur. The remainder of the Chinese women (50 per cent) hoped, like the remaining 32 per cent of the Canadian women did, that their husbands/partners would have jobs more prestigious than theirs. With respect to pay, slightly over half the men and women in Canada hoped that spousal earnings would be equal. The same percentage of Canadian women actually believed that this would occur; however, fewer Canadian men were so optimistic. In China, 57 per cent of the men hoped that earnings would be equal but only one third believed this would happen. Most men believed that they would earn more. Most Chinese women hoped (61 per cent) and believed (51 per cent) that their husbands would earn more.

Chinese women's and men's hopes and beliefs with respect to household tasks and childcare are reported in Table III with comparable Canadian data from Beatty *et al.'s* study (1992). While most men and women in both countries hoped that housework would be shared equally by spouses, the majority of women in both countries and Chinese men believed the women would actually do more. The majority of Canadian men (2/3) believed there would be equal sharing. When it came to childcare men and women from both countries hoped for equality. Approximately half of Chinese men and women agreed the women would actually do more and the remainder believed it would be shared equally. Canadian women agreed, but Canadian men were more likely (63 per cent) to believe the women would do more. In general, women in China, like their Canadian counterparts, believed that their male partners/spouses would not do even an equal share of childcare and housework, even though they hoped this would occur. Similar findings were also reported by Zhang and Farley (1995) in their study comparing the distribution of household work among Chinese and American female college

Table II Spousal employment, earnings and job nature

Spousal employment	Full time %	Part time%	No %	Not sure %
Hope				
China (female)	96.4	2.4	0.0	1.2
China (male)	55.9	30.5	5.1	8.5
Canada[a] (female)	**95.3**	**1.2**	**0.0**	**3.5**
Canada (male)	69.0	12.6	3.4	14.9
Believe				
China (female)	98.9	1.1	0.0	0.0
China (male)	80.4	12.5	1.0	3.0
Canada[a] (female)	90.8	1.1	0.0	8.0
Canada (male)	54.5	18.2	2.3	25.0

Spousal job prestige	More than mine %	Less than mine %	Same as mine %	Not working %
Hope				
China (female)	52.4	0.0	47.6	0.0
China (male)	14.5	16.4	69.1	0.0
Canada[a] (female)	10.8	0.0	83.1	0.0
Canada (male)	14.1	15.3	68.2	0.0
Believe				
China (female)	48.8	4.8	46.4	0.0
China (male)	7.3	38.2	52.7	1.8
Canada[a] (female)	34.1	10.6	55.3	0.0
Canada (male)	4.5	31.8	61.4	2.3

Spousal earnings	More than mine %	Less than mine %	Same as mine %	Not working %
Hope				
China (female)	60.7	1.2	38.1	0.0
China (male)	7.1	33.9	57.1	1.8
Canada[a] (female)	42.4	1.2	56.5	0.0
Canada (male)	36.5	10.6	50.6	2.4
Believe				
China (female)	51.2	7.1	41.7	0.0
China (male)	1.8	62.5	33.9	1.8
Canada[a] (female)	40.2	5.7	54.0	0.0
Canada (male)	6.8	47.7	43.2	2.3

Note:
[a]data obtained from Beatty *et al.* (1992)

professors. It appears that, as in North America, Chinese women will do more of the "second shift" work (Hochschild, 1989) associated with a child and a home than their spouses.

Importance of organizational initiatives
Table IV summarizes the importance of 32 organizational initiatives to Chinese business students. Of the 32 initiatives, five were significantly more important to Chinese women than to Chinese men. These included: a job-sharing program, gender awareness training, a good corporate daycare centre, financial assistance for childcare and a referral service to agencies providing domestic, childcare and elder care services. This is in contrast to the data from Canadian business school graduates collected by McKeen and Bujaki (1998), in which 26 of the 32 initiatives were significantly more important to women than to men. In China, family emergency days off was the only initiative more important to men than to women compared to none among Canadian graduates. Chinese men and

Table III Sharing of household tasks and childcare: hopes and beliefs of Chinese and Canadian business students

	Shared equally %	I will do more %	Spouse will do more %
Housework (hope)			
China (female)	85.5	7.9	6.6
China (male)	73.9	6.5	19.6
Canada[a] (female)	96.2	2.6	1.2
Canada (male)	90.3	1.4	8.4
Housework (believe)			
China (female)	41.4	54.3	4.3
China (male)	28.9	13.3	57.8
Canada[a] (female)	34.9	62.6	2.5
Canada (male)	66.2	9.2	9.6
Childcare (hope)			
China (female)	81.9	18.1	0.0
China (male)	76.4	5.5	18.2
Canada[a] (female)	88.7	10.0	1.1
Canada (male)	89.4	0.0	19.5
Childcare (believe)			
China (female)	46.3	44.8	9.0
China (male)	52.3	6.8	40.9
Canada[a] (female)	42.3	55.1	2.6
Canada (male)	34.2	2.5	62.9

Note:
[a]data obtained from Beatty *et al.* (1992)

women agreed on six of their top ten initiatives, however the rankings they assigned to the importance of each were different. The six they both included in their top ten were, gender awareness training, company sponsored maternity leave, training for career mobility, formal performance reviews, challenging work assignments and financial support for management development outside the organization. The four additional ones important to women were transfer policies which consider both personal and professional needs, sexual harassment policy, company-sponsored paternity leave and flexible vacation arrangements. The men's other four were family emergency days off, computer technology to work at home, a commitment to the "family" by senior management, and psychological and health counselling.

In the interviews with the Chinese students, we explored the reasons why job sharing and part-time arrangements which have recently been implemented in Canada to help employees to balance work and family were ranked by Chinese women as of low importance. Virtually all of the Chinese

women we interviewed expressed an interest in a policy that would allow them to return to work after their maternity leave on a 60 per cent or 80 per cent basis. However, they simultaneously expressed hopelessness that this would ever be possible. As one at a multinational accounting firm said, " … they do not accept anyone who works part time." Another told us that she would stay at her firm if she could work an 80 per cent program after she has a child, and went on to say, " … if they really want you to work here, they can do it for you, but right now they won't, they will recruit more people (and let you go instead)." The importance of the consideration of such policies to these women was signalled by their assertion that if their careers affected their families they would have to seek less demanding jobs. For many the possibility of a part-time option would avert this interruption in their careers.

Because of the importance of professional women's networks in western nations, we explored this concept with the women we interviewed. Many wanted to be a part of such an organization and were eager to begin the

Table IV Importance of organizational initiatives to Chinese business students

Organizational initiative	Mean[a]		
	Female	Male	t
Gender awareness training	4.36 (1)	3.77 (10)	3.32***
Company-sponsored maternity leave	4.18 (2)	4.03 (3)	0.79
Training for career mobility	4.08 (3)	3.88 (9)	1.12
Formal performance reviews	4.01 (4)	3.89 (8)	0.67
Challenging work assignments	3.98 (5)	4.08 (2)	−0.60
Transfer policies which consider both personal and professional needs	3.88 (6)	3.73 (11)	0.84
Financial support for management development outside the organization	3.82 (8)	3.92 (6)	−0.96
Sexual harassment policy	3.82 (8)	3.70 (15)	0.55
Company-sponsored paternity leave	3.79 (9)	3.47 (22)	1.53
Flexible vacation arrangements	3.78 (11)	3.56 (18)	1.21
Computer technology making it possible to work at home	3.78 (11)	3.97 (4)	−1.13
A commitment to the "family" by senior management	3.77 (13)	3.95 (5)	−0.97
A referral service to agencies providing domestic/childcare/elder care services	3.77 (13)	3.04 (30)	3.90***
Flexible working hours to better manage personal and work life	3.76 (14)	3.54 (19)	1.17
Family emergency days off	3.75 (15)	4.08 (1)	−1.89[b]
Formal mentoring programs	3.75 (16)	3.56 (18)	1.06
Unpaid leaves of absence for professional reasons	3.68 (17)	3.62 (16)	0.37
Psychological and health counseling	3.66 (19)	3.90 (7)	−1.23
Advertisement of all job openings	3.66 (19)	3.71 (12)	−0.28
Good corporate daycare centre	3.64 (20)	3.24 (25)	1.90[b]
Financial support for participation in professional organizations	3.62 (22)	3.70 (15)	−0.55
Time off in lieu of overtime	3.62 (22)	3.50 (21)	0.63
Career counseling, planning and pathing which incorporates personal as well as professional goals	3.58 (23)	3.70 (15)	−0.71
Travel policies which consider both personal and professional needs	3.56 (24)	3.32 (24)	1.34
Formally stated qualifications for all positions	3.51 (25)	3.41 (23)	0.50
Financial assistance for childcare	3.47 (26)	3.06 (29)	2.05*
Unpaid leaves of absence for personal reasons	3.43 (27)	3.50 (21)	−0.37
Part-time work arrangements which still permit promotion	3.36 (28)	3.13 (27)	1.15
Provision of childcare allowance for overtime or out-of-town work	3.34 (39)	3.08 (28)	1.22
Support for personal errands	3.33 (30)	3.13 (27)	1.04
A shorter work week	3.22 (31)	3.04 (31)	0.99
A job-sharing program	3.11 (32)	2.66 (32)	2.28*

Notes

[a]numbers are mean responses to five-point Likert scales on the importance of various organizational initiatives (1 = not at all important, 5 = very important). Numbers in parentheses indicate the importance ranking of various organizational initiatives

[b]$p = < 0.10$; *$p = < 0.05$; **$p = < 0.01$; ***$p = < 0.001$

process. As one commented, "It's a good idea – the women will come – it is my pleasure to help with this. We can share information and get new ideas from the discussions."

Discussion of results

Chinese students of both sexes appear from a number of indicators to be more career focussed than their Canadian counterparts. They attach more importance to their occupational role, will devote more time to it, will interrupt it primarily to further their education or their careers, and will defer their marital and parental roles longer than Canadian students. Furthermore, perhaps because of a variety of factors including the one child policy and childcare by extended family members in China, far fewer Chinese students than Canadian students anticipate difficulty managing work and family. Traditionally, grandparents have provided childcare in China, however, this arrangement is breaking down to some extent as families become separated in the process of urbanization (Chen, 1997). Although the majority of the students we interviewed did not anticipate future difficulties with childcare, one male with a child had recently had to make the difficult decision to send his baby daughter thousands of kilometers away to be cared for by her grandparents because he and his wife could not find suitable care nearby. Chinese students' career focus also includes a willingness to change jobs frequently to further their success. This has implications for their employers who will want to retain their expertise and the investment in their training and development, particularly in the face of the severe shortage of professionally trained personnel in China.

The competence of and devotion to hard work by the Chinese women is particularly impressive if one considers the historical societal context of China in which women's intelligence and competence have been undervalued and denigrated (Summerfield, 1994). Despite their commitment to their careers, the Chinese women show a marked pessimism during the interviews about their future career prospects compared to their male colleagues. This is disturbing considering the similarity of the competence and drive of both sexes. For the men it seems that the sky is the limit as they envision their futures as well-trained, English-speaking Chinese with a Canadian professional designation entering the burgeoning Chinese economy. Although the Chinese women have the same training and language proficiency, and in their own view and the view of their male colleagues they are at least as smart and driven, both the women and men agree that the women will not achieve the same success. The women expressed anger and sadness at this realization and cite negative stereotypes, lack of mentors and sponsors, isolation, and lack of accommodation to their reproductive function as major obstacles. A sense of hopelessness about any change in this situation is also expressed – the women do not seem to understand their value to their employers and that it may be possible to negotiate for change. Virtually all of them anticipate that they will deal with the situation by changing employers. Furthermore, several of the students, particularly the women commented that the treatment of the Chinese, particularly the women, is in conflict with the espoused localization policies of many multinationals. When confronted during the interviews with the types of initiatives being employed in organizations in the West, they expressed a very high level of interest in returning to work after the birth of their one child on a part-time basis with the option of switching back to full time when they were ready. For many this represents a very attractive alternative to changing employers. The interest in this which was expressed in the interviews was in contrast to the relatively low level of interest in this and other potential organizational initiatives reported in the survey. This may be explained by the low awareness of the Chinese students about human resource initiatives. During the interviews we had the time to explain the initiatives to the interviewees and to discuss their benefits to employers and employees in western nations. This was necessary because at the present time the business curriculum in China does not include courses in human resource management or organizational behavior.

It appears that the family system and gender roles will affect the Chinese women and men in similar ways to their North American counterparts. Most men and women in China, like their Canadian counterparts, express a preference for egalitarian relationships in their hopes that household tasks and childcare will be shared equally by spouses/partners. Their beliefs, however, about what will actually happen reflect a pessimism about the relatively unchanged roles of men and women at home. Despite their equal

education, these young women and men do not believe that they will have equal energy and time to devote to their careers, because they agree that the women will be more involved than the men in the parental role.

Conclusion

One cannot help but be impressed by the drive and determination of the Chinese students as they and their country struggle to take their places in the global economy. What is clear is that, despite our cultural differences, many of the same issues facing women in the West appear to be emerging as a part of the lives of professional women in China.

In China, where there will be only one child per family, that child threatens to permanently disrupt the career of at least one parent, and the men and women both expect that it will be the mother. From our discussions with human resource professionals in multinational accounting firms in China, it is clear that how to manage a workforce that is predominantly female is low on the priority list as they struggle to meet the immediate demands of expanding their practices in the burgeoning economy. Although they acknowledge that this will be an issue as their first intake of professional women approaches the age at which they wish to have a child, it seems to be a problem that is not getting the attention its business implications warrant.

These organizations have not yet adjusted their policies and procedures to reflect the realities of the family systems of their employees. Of particular interest is that some of these organizations are multinationals well known in the West for initiatives to promote the satisfaction, retention and advancement of professional women. The policies and procedures they have in place in the West are so far absent in China, despite a pressing need for them. In fact, there is the general perception in China that foreign firms tend to shy away from hiring and retaining married women with children (Riley, 1996) despite the fact that discrimination on the basis of sex is deemed illegal according to China's Labour Law (Warner, 1996).

In public accounting firms the problem is especially pressing since women average about two-thirds of their recruits in China compared with approximately 50 per cent in North America. Whatever the costs of low morale and high turnover among women, the problem will be larger in China because of the larger proportion of women, and more acute because of the severe shortage of professionally trained personnel.

In recent years, China has witnessed a rapid growth of semi-official women's organizations. There is consensus that the existing official women's organization (the All-China Women's Federation) faces increasing difficulties in representing women's interests in the new socioeconomic environment where the expansion of the non-state sector has created new groups of women who cannot be reached by the official channels (White et al., 1996). We therefore explored the idea of establishing a CGA China women's network in order for women who face isolation and difficulty in the workplace to provide mutual support for one another. This was met with overwhelming enthusiasm by the women we interviewed.

The Chinese business students we interviewed expressed a desire not only to be managed by people sensitive to their needs but to also become effective managers of human resources. However, at the present time, management in China is still taught from an almost exclusively quantitative perspective, with organizational behavior and human resource management receiving little attention (Borgonjon and Vanhonacker, 1992; Deng and Wang, 1992). Compared to their Canadian counterparts, the Chinese students show a low level of awareness of the organizations' role in assuring their career success. The business curriculum of Chinese universities will need to be expanded to better prepare the future generations of Chinese managers and professionals to address human resource issues.

Note

1 Although the Canadian data were collected earlier than the Chinese data, we find no compelling reasons to believe that the observed differences between the students in Canada and China with respect to most of the issues addressed in this paper would be substantially different if more recent Canadian data were obtained. However, we speculate that the observed differences between the two samples concerning various organizational initiatives to address the gender issue might be even more striking now because of the proliferation of articles in the popular press and in recruiting materials in North America relating to the issue. These articles would be expected to have the effect of increasing Canadian students' awareness of the organizational initiatives being undertaken to address the gender issue in the workplace.

References

Amatea, E.S., Cross, E.G., Clark, J.E. and Bobby, C.L. (1986), "Assessing the work and family role expectations of career-oriented men and women: the life role salience scale", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 48, pp. 831-8.

Beatty, C.A., McKeen, C.A. and Kurdyak, C. (1992), "Generation X: the changing career values and expectations of recent business graduates", presented at Annual Conference of the Administrative Science Association of Canada, Lake Louise, AB.

Borgonjon, J. and Vanhonacker, W.R. (1992), "Modernizing China's managers", *The China Business Review*, September-October, pp. 12-18.

CGA-Canada (1996a), "Accounting in Asia: Growth of a Canadian success story", *CGA Backgrounder*, September 11. URL: http: //www.cga-canada.org/ news/back_e.htm.

CGA-Canada (1996b),"Meeting Asia's accounting shortage: The CGA solution", *CGA Backgrounder*, September 17. URL: http: //www.cga-canada.org/ news/back2_e.htm.

CGA-Canada (1997), *China Program Statistics,* CGA Canada, Vancouver, Canada.

Chen, X. (1997), "Chinese marriages and families", *China Today*, Vol. XLVI No. 5, pp. 18-20.

Deng, S.L. and Wang, Y.L. (1992), "Management education in China: past, present and future", *World Development*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp. 873-80.

Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis (1996), *World Economic and Social Survey: 1996*, United Nations, New York.

England, G.W. and Lee, R. (1974), "The relationship between managerial values and managerial success in the United States, Japan, India, and Australia", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 59, pp. 411-9.

Evetts, J. (1994), *Women and Career: Themes and Issues in Advanced Industrial Societies*, Longman Group, UK.

Fagenson, E.A. (1993), *Women in Management: Trends, Issues and Challenges in Managerial Diversity*, Sage, London.

Gerkovich Griffith, P., MacBride-King, J.L. and Townsend, B. (1997), *Closing the Gap – Women's Advancement in Corporate and Professional Canada*, The Conference Board of Canada and Catalyst, Ottawa, Canada.

Hochschild, A. (1989), *The Second Shift*, Avon, New York.

Lincoln, J.R., Olson, J. and Hanada, M. (1978), "Cultural effects of organizational structures: the case of Japanese firms in the United States", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 43, pp. 829-47.

Lockett, M. (1988), "Culture and the problem of Chinese management", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 9, pp. 475-96.

McKeen, C.A. and Bujaki, M.L. (1998), "Organizational initiatives important to managerial and professional women and men", manuscript under review, School of Business, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada.

Morrison, A.M., White, R.P., van Velsor, E. and the Centre for Creative Leadership (1987), *Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Can Women Reach the Top of America's Largest Corporations?,* Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.

Ralston, D.A., Gustafson, D.J., Cheung, F.M. and Terpstra, R.H. (1993), "Differences in managerial values: a study of US, Hong Kong and PRC managers", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 24, pp. 249-75.

Ralston, D.A., Holt, D. H., Terpstra, R.H. and Yu, K.C. (1997), "The impact of national culture and economic ideology on managerial work values: a study of the United States, Russia, Japan, and China", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 28, pp. 177-207.

Ricks, D.A., Toyne, B. and Martinez, Z. (1990), "Recent developments in international management research", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 16, pp. 219-53.

Riley, N.E. (1996), "Holding half of the economy", *China Business Review*, January-February, pp. 22-4.

Strober, M.H., Bradford, D.L. and Jackman, J.M. (1992), "A glass breaker's guide to the ceiling", unpublished manuscript, Stanford University.

Summerfield, G. (1994), "Economic reform and the employment of Chinese women", *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 715-32.

United Nations (1995), *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics*, United Nations, New York, NY.

Warner, M. (1992), *How Chinese Managers Learn*, Macmillan, London.

Warner, M. (1996), "Chinese enterprise reform, human resources and the 1994 Labour Law", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 779-96.

White, G., Howell, J. and Shang, X. (1996), "Urban women and the women's federation", in White, G., Howell, J. and Shang, X. (Eds), *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 69-97.

Zhang, C.X. and Farley, J.E. (1995), "Gender and the distribution of household work: a comparison of self-reports by female college faculty in the USA and China", *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. 26, pp. 195-205.