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Holding up the sky together? Family support dynamics and gender in entrepreneurship in China

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ABSTRACT

Previous efforts to integrate culture and gender into a comprehensive theoretical framework for family support in entrepreneurship have fallen short. This study aims to clarify the influence of gender and culture on family support for women entrepreneurs in a patriarchal society. We use a qualitative approach, conducting 25 semi-structured interviews with Chinese women entrepreneurs who reflect on support from 81 family members. By conceptualizing family support and employing ideal-type analysis, we create a family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix that outlines four ideal types of family support for entrepreneurship. Our findings advance the literature by offering a more multidimensional view of family support, moving beyond simple categories to include three additional dimensions: family members' approval (none or yes), their background (entrepreneurial or non-entrepreneurial), and their cultural embeddedness. Additionally, we highlight the role of individual family members – such as spouses, parents, and in-laws – in supporting entrepreneurship, which is often overlooked and provides deeper insights into the diverse roles family members play in women's entrepreneurial journeys.

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Entrepreneurship; women entrepreneurship; family dynamics; family support; gender; China

Introduction

Family support is a crucial factor in the success of female-founded businesses (Jennings and Brush 2013), as women are more likely to rely on family support than men (Nielsen 2020). Family support is particularly important for women entrepreneurs in environments influenced by deep-rooted gender roles (Jennings and Brush 2013; Shinnar, Giacomin, and Janssen 2012). Studies indicate that family members can reinforce normative pressures on entrepreneurs (Karim et al. 2023), which might obstruct their entrepreneurial efforts. However, family members can also play a significant role in fostering persistence in entrepreneurship (Kim, Longest, and Aldrich 2013) and in launching new ventures (Anderson, Jack, and Dodd 2005). Considering the interaction between family support and gender in entrepreneurship, we aim to address the following main research question: How do gender roles and culture influence family support for engaging in entrepreneurship within emerging economies with patriarchal

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traditions? To answer this, we explore two sub-questions: Who are the family supporters of women entrepreneurs in patriarchal societies? And what kinds of help do these family members provide?

The interaction between gender and culture significantly influences gender roles, expectations, and identities (Bullough et al. 2022). However, current research on family support in entrepreneurship remains fragmented. While studies differentiate various types of family support – instrumental, informational, emotional – and examine their effects on entrepreneurship (Kim, Longest, and Aldrich 2013; Klyver, Honig, and Steffens 2018; Powell and Eddleston 2013, 2017), efforts to integrate culture and gender within a comprehensive theoretical framework for family support in entrepreneurship have been limited. To clarify the roles of these two factors and help resolve this theoretical puzzle, we investigate the contributions of different family members to entrepreneurial processes in China. China's emerging economy offers a unique context due to its distinctive interplay of evolving social, economic, and cultural factors (Huang, Liu, and Li 2020; Smallbone and Welter 2012; Su, Zhai, and Landström 2015), including changes within the internal family structure (Ahlstrom et al. 2025). Contrary to the Maoist-era slogan 'holding up half the sky' for women (Gui 2020, 1957), China has become one of the most gender-unequal countries in East Asia amidst a resurgence of traditional gender roles (World Economic Forum 2024). Government narratives about women entrepreneurs, rooted in traditional Chinese culture (Blalock and Lyu 2023), emphasize that women should adhere to conventional roles within their families (Gui 2020). Despite the revival of traditional gender norms, rapid urbanization driven by rural-urban transformation (Alpermann 2021) is disrupting traditional household divisions of labour in cities (de Bruin and Liu 2020). Based on a literature review on family support in entrepreneurship, we developed a conceptualization to analyse 25 semi-structured interviews with Chinese women entrepreneurs, focusing on whether and what types of support they receive from their families.

We utilize the family support conceptualization established in our literature review to guide our data analysis and perform an ideal-type analysis based on Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley (2021, 2022). Our work results in a 2×2 family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix that describes the family support and approval extended to women entrepreneurs in China. The family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix illustrates four ideal types of family support: Modernists (approval and multiple supports), modern traditionalists (no approval and multiple supports), fake modernists (approval and no support), and traditionalists (no approval and no support). We detail how approval and support are given or withheld by different family members and explore how the backgrounds of family members (entrepreneurial or non-entrepreneurial) influence the types of support provided. Furthermore, we discuss how cultural embeddedness affects the approval of family members of women entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial activities. Our insights advance the theoretical understanding of family support in patriarchal societies and contribute to explaining shifts in family support in entrepreneurship. Thus, our research responds to calls for studies into family dynamics in entrepreneurship (Hytti, Karhunen, and Radu-Lefebvre 2024; Powell and Eddleston 2017). Based on our findings, we suggest ways for women entrepreneurs to develop alternative sources in patriarchal societies when family approval and support are absent. Additionally, we propose a broader research agenda on family influence in entrepreneurship and women's entrepreneurship outside European and North American contexts (Cooke and Xiao 2021; Su, Zhai, and Landström 2015; Schaper and Ettl 2025; Terjesen, Hessels, and Li 2016; Wolf and Frese 2018).

The article is organized as follows: First, we review the literature on family support in entrepreneurship, exploring different ways support is provided. This section is followed by a discussion of women's entrepreneurship and family support within patriarchal societies, focusing on China's institutional and social contexts. Second, we outline our research design and methodological choices. Third, we present our main findings related to family support for women's entrepreneurship in China. Our paper concludes with a discussion of key insights and contributions to understanding the relationship between entrepreneurship, family support, gender, and culture in societies experiencing significant changes at the intersection of modernity and tradition.

Literature review

Conceptualization of family support in entrepreneurship

Family-to-business support can be defined as 'social support received from family members for one's entrepreneurial activities' and is considered a form of resource that family members may provide to entrepreneurs and their companies (Powell and Eddleston 2013, 265). We have reviewed key works (see Table 1) and identified three categories of family support in entrepreneurship reflected in the literature: (1) instrumental support, (2) informational support, and (3) emotional support. Because aspects of these three family support categories are discussed in the literature without being explicitly labelled, our review reveals that existing research is fragmented, especially regarding efforts to integrate multiple family support categories into a comprehensive theoretical framework. Additionally, we observe that the literature often refers to 'the family' without specifying 'who' in the family provides 'what' categories of support.

Building on our literature review of family support in entrepreneurship, we integrate aspects of the family support categories from Powell and Eddleston (2013, 2017), Kim, Longest, and Aldrich (2013), and Klyver, Honig, and Steffens (2018), into a comprehensive conceptualization of family-to-entrepreneurship support: (1) Instrumental support (introductions; personal services like childcare and household tasks; financial resources; physical resources; labor; business services; and training), (2) informational support (advice and ideas), and (3) emotional support (listening, empathy, encouragement, understanding, attention, and positive regard).

In their task-role alignment framework of social support, Kim, Longest, and Aldrich (2013, 226) identify family support as consisting of two main categories: informational support (advice and ideas) and instrumental support (introductions, personal services, financial resources, physical resources, labour, business services, and business training). Klyver, Honig, and Steffens (2018) built upon the work of Kim, Longest, and Aldrich (2013) by demonstrating that not only does instrumental support have an impact, but emotional support also directly influences entrepreneurial persistence. Highlighting the social embeddedness of entrepreneurship, Klyver, Honig, and Steffens (2018, 710) define emotional support as 'listening and providing empathy'. Klyver, Honig, and Steffens (2018) argue that emotional support is especially vital during the early stages of a business, while instrumental support plays a bigger role for younger entrepreneurs. Similarly, Powell and Eddleston (2017) incorporate emotional support along with business instrumental support and household instrumental support within their family-to-business support model. Powell and Eddleston (2017, 616) describe emotional support as 'encouragement, understanding, attention, and positive regard'.

Culture, gender, and family support dynamics in entrepreneurship

Culture is a multifaceted construct that influences entrepreneurial processes (Nguyen, Shami, and Li 2025; Shinnar, Giacomin, and Janssen 2012). As it shapes the roles of women in society, culture plays a role in differences in women's entrepreneurship and can hinder women's entrepreneurial activities. With entrepreneurship traditionally seen as a male-dominated field (Rugina and Ahl 2024), barriers for women entrepreneurs are deeply rooted in existing cultural norms, values, and traditions (Bullough et al. 2022).

Family members may contribute to creating such barriers for women entrepreneurs by reinforcing traditional gender roles, which can negatively impact women's entrepreneurship (Welter and Smallbone 2010). Research in patriarchal societies illustrates prescribed gender roles, where women are mainly seen as wives and mothers rather than entrepreneurs and are expected to prioritize family over entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani et al. 2019; Bui, Kuan, and Chu 2018; Constantinidis et al. 2019; Omran and Yousafzai 2024; Tlaiss and Kauser 2010; Tlaiss and McAdam 2021). For example, women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh often find themselves in family environments where relatives disapprove of entrepreneurship, deny permission, or even sabotage their business efforts (Karim et al.

Table 1. Literature review of key works on categories of family support in entrepreneurship.

Who helps?	How do they help?	Empirical setting	Literature reference	Methods
Spouse	Prioritize the entrepreneur's career with instrumental support	N/A	Jennings and McDougald (2007)	Conceptual research
	Financial capital	China	Au and Kwan (2009)	Quantitative
	Take care of sick family members	China	Tian and Zheng (2015)	Quantitative
	Give business advice, participate in business decision-making, provide access to key stakeholders, help with childcare, listen to entrepreneur in difficult times of the business, provide encouragement in difficult times, provide initial capital for the business, serve as loan guarantee and fund business growth	Morocco	Constantinidis et al. (2019)	Qualitative
	Give advice during business creation, acquire business customers (early stage), lend money to start the business, teach business skills	Scotland	Anderson, Jack, and Dodd (2005)	Mixed methods
	Provide access to networks and possible resources, provide encouragement in difficult times	United States	Renzulli, Aldrich, and Moody (2000)	Quantitative
	Execute household responsibilities, encourage spouse to start the business and act as cheerleader in difficult times	United States	Rogers (2005)	Mixed methods
	Provide emotional support in work-related issues	United States	Gudmunson et al. (2009)	Quantitative
	Hands-on business support; advice, ideas, and networks; emotional support; financial resources; household and family assignments; business interference (spousal influence)	Global	Wolf and Frese (2018)	Systematic literature review
Parents	Help with childcare, share household duties, offer psychological support and comfort	China	Tan (2008)	Quantitative
	Introduce entrepreneurs to contacts/networks, provide access to networks	Global	Edelman et al. (2016)	Quantitative
	Fund their child's education	Morocco	Constantinidis et al. (2019)	Qualitative
	Give business advice	New Zealand	Kirkwood and Tootell (2008)	Qualitative
	Encourage entrepreneurship (childhood and later in life)	New Zealand	Kirkwood (2012)	Qualitative
	Provide financial support (business creation)	Scotland	Anderson, Jack, and Dodd (2005)	Mixed methods
	Encourage children to pursue entrepreneurship	Sweden	Davidsson and Honig (2003)	Quantitative
Father	Be an entrepreneurial inspiration, give business advice	New Zealand	Kirkwood and Tootell (2008); Kirkwood (2012)	Qualitative
	Give advice during business creation, guarantee bank loan to start the business	Scotland	Anderson, Jack, and Dodd (2005)	Mixed methods
In-laws	Childcare and household-related support (migrant entrepreneurs in Australia)	Australia	Azmat and Fujimoto (2016)	Qualitative
	Provide access to networks, offer technical expertise	Scotland	Anderson, Jack, and Dodd (2005)	Mixed methods

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Who helps?	How do they help?	Empirical setting	Literature reference	Methods
Family	Provide access to networks, provide financial support, mentor entrepreneurs	China	Scott et al. (2014)	Qualitative
	Provide feedback on ideas for the business, provide emotional support, be understanding in challenging, offer unpaid work	China	Tian and Zheng (2015)	Quantitative
	Emotional support (listening and providing empathy)	Denmark	Klyver, Honig, and Steffens (2018)	Quantitative
	Family organizational support, family financial support, family moral support	Global	Welsh, Kaciak, and Thongpapanl (2016)	Quantitative
	Offer moral support, borrow money to start the business	Jordan and Sudan	Welsh et al. (2021)	Quantitative
	Participate in business decision-making, give business advice, listen to entrepreneurs in difficult times of the business, provide encouragement in difficult times, provide initial capital, serve as loan guarantee, fund business growth	Morocco	Constantinidis et al. (2019)	Qualitative
	Help to access information, provide access to resources that would otherwise not be available, provide access to professional resources, recognize entrepreneurship opportunities, business development and continuity, access to affective resources	Scotland	Anderson, Jack, and Dodd (2005)	Mixed methods
	Discuss private problems, help to deal with private problems	Republic of Korea	Welsh et al. (2014)	Quantitative
	Provide constructive feedback on business strategies, provide feedback on ideas for the business, have confidence (managing family and business)	Türkiye	Welsh, Memili, and Kaciak (2016)	Quantitative
	Emotional support (listening, attention, understanding), instrumental support for the business (work assistance), instrumental support at home (taking over household tasks)	United States	Eddleston and Powell (2012)	Quantitative
	Nurturing entrepreneurial business (financial and human resources), 'security blanket' (provide financial resources when financial problems faced), emotional sustenance	United States	Powell and Eddleston (2013)	Quantitative
	Emotional support (encouragement, understanding, attention, and positive regard), instrumental support at business (offering feedback on ideas for the business, unpaid work assistance), instrumental support at home (taking over household tasks)	United States	Powell and Eddleston (2017)	Quantitative
	Informational support (advice and ideas) and instrumental support (introductions, personal services, financial resources, physical resources, labour, business services, and business training)	United States	Kim, Longest, and Aldrich (2013)	Quantitative
	Share information	United States	Renzulli, Aldrich, and Moody (2000)	Quantitative
	Give business advice, provide feedback on ideas for the business, encourage to pursue an entrepreneurial career	United States	Eddleston and Powell (2012)	Quantitative
	Carry out a great share of household responsibilities, be committed and believe in entrepreneurial ability, assist in the business	United States	Chang et al. (2009)	Quantitative
Child(ren)	Support mother in pursuing entrepreneurship	United States	Rogers (2005)	Mixed methods

2023). Family members, especially spouses, tend to dominate and suppress entrepreneurial ambitions and may also exploit women financially (Jaim 2022).

On the contrary, family members can provide essential support to help women entrepreneurs overcome cultural and gender role barriers (Welter and Smallbone 2008). Studies in Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia) and Africa (Ethiopia) show how approval from family members, especially male relatives like fathers and spouses, can assist in navigating the gendered landscape shaped by tradition, offering access to financial capital and networks (Alkhaled and Berglund 2018; Barragan, Erogul, and Essers 2018; Constantinidis et al. 2019; Cummings and Lopez 2023; Tahir and El Baradie 2019; Tlaiss 2014). Further emphasizing the importance of family approval for obtaining financial resources, a study of women entrepreneurs in Nepal highlights the need for securing consent from spouses and in-laws, as such approval was seen as a pathway to family funding (Xheneti, Karki, and Madden 2019). Additionally, family financial support, along with instrumental and emotional backing from spouses, can help women navigate gendered barriers in entrepreneurship in patriarchal societies (Constantinidis et al. 2019; Hatoum, Haddoud, and Mordi 2023).

Culture, gender, and family dynamics in women's entrepreneurship in China

Contexts matter and influence entrepreneurship activities (Welter 2011; Welter and Gartner 2016), and thus also shape women's entrepreneurship in China. Capturing entrepreneurship in China, characterized by shifts in its social context, requires acknowledging the interaction between the family sphere (family dynamics) and the business sphere (Ahlstrom et al. 2025). In the following, we outline China's contextual features to illustrate how understandings of culture and gender roles can affect the family support Chinese women receive during their entrepreneurial journeys.

China is recognized as a family-centred society (Au and Kwan 2009) with a patriarchal culture (Leung 2003). Historically, the Chinese family model is rooted in Confucian values, which shape relationships between family members and their roles within families (Zhang and Zhou 2021). These values include intergenerational relationships – such as filial piety, honouring parents, and maintaining family lineage – and gendered power dynamics in spousal relationships (Hu and Scott 2016; Zhan and Montgomery 2003). Women in China have typically been positioned within patriarchal family structures, often relegated to roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law (Evans 2021). In such environments, women face pressure to conform to family expectations. For example, studies show that women are commonly viewed as 'homemakers', while men are regarded as 'breadwinners' (Qian and Qian 2015, 71). These environments create cultural barriers for women entrepreneurs in China (Blalock and Lyu 2023; Wiig, Schou, and Hansen 2024).

Nevertheless, family dynamics in China are shaped by changing socio-economic and cultural contexts, including shifts within the family structure (Ahlstrom et al. 2025). These changes create tensions between women and their family members over gender role expectations (Evans 2010). Although China has undergone significant socio-economic and demographic shifts in recent decades, the traditional Chinese family model largely remains intact. This results in a setting where family members may expect their daughters, wives, or daughters-in-law to follow gender norms instead of supporting their entrepreneurial pursuits. For example, a recent study on perceived parental mentoring highlights identity shifts in family systems and tensions among members in entrepreneurial families (Li, Ge, and Dou 2025).

Methodology

Research design

Aiming to better understand how culture and gender influence family support for women entrepreneurs, we explore family support dynamics from the perspectives and experiences of

Chinese women entrepreneurs. We conducted 25 semi-structured interviews to learn about the support they receive from their families in their entrepreneurial pursuits. Qualitative research is especially useful for understanding these contexts because they are experienced and enacted by entrepreneurs (Baker and Welter 2020). To develop a typology of family support, we use (Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley's 2021, 2022) ideal-type analysis as a comprehensive and systematic approach. In management research, applying ideal-type analysis is a relatively innovative method. This approach has origins in sociology (e.g. Gerhardt 1994) and traces back to Max Weber, who defined an ideal type not as the best or most complete representation of a phenomenon but as a theoretical construct that helps in understanding reality (Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley 2021). When scholars use ideal-type analysis, they must reflect on the epistemological assumptions underlying their research (Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley 2022). In our study, we adopt a qualitative research design within a social constructivist paradigm and an interpretive tradition (Creswell 2013). Consequently, we view the world as socially constructed and consider the experiences and stories of our women entrepreneurs as the foundation for developing ideal types of the phenomenon under study.

Empirical setting

China has experienced an unprecedented pace of urbanization (Alpermann 2021). Previously, researchers have called for further investigation into the impact of urbanization on entrepreneurship in China (Huang, Liu, and Li 2020). Studies on the connection between urbanization and household gender inequalities in China show that urbanization has created societal challenges and contributed to weakening traditional gender roles within households in megacities (de Bruin and Liu 2020). Women entrepreneurs in urban areas with rural backgrounds, while being exposed to more egalitarian views on gender roles in city environments, still remain bound by traditional gender expectations (Williams, Ghorbani, and Kalnins 2023). Our study focuses on the megacities of Beijing, Chengdu, Chongqing, and Hangzhou. As a result, the empirical setting may reflect both more progressive gender norms and more diverse cultural contexts than rural areas. Additionally, Chinese megacities offer a vibrant business environment with many opportunities for entrepreneurial activity and engagement with women entrepreneurs.

Sampling and sample

Motivated by the goal of gaining a deep understanding of family support dynamics and gender roles in entrepreneurship in China, we focus our data collection on 25 Chinese women entrepreneurs through semi-structured interviews. We combined a purposive sampling strategy (Patton 2002) with elements of snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019). Our sample was guided by the following criteria: (1) women entrepreneurs from diverse family situations (single, partnered, married, divorced, and widowed), (2) women entrepreneurs with different family backgrounds (entrepreneurial vs. non-entrepreneurial family members), and (3) women entrepreneurs operating in urban China. Since our study emphasizes family support dynamics and gender, we did not focus on including women entrepreneurs from specific industries or company sizes. To find interviewees who fit our criteria, we used multiple channels: (1) reaching out to women entrepreneurs at events, (2) posting in WeChat groups, and (3) requesting referrals from interviewees and personal contacts. By leveraging referrals, we incorporated elements of snowball sampling into our recruitment process. According to our criteria, our sample includes women entrepreneurs from diverse family backgrounds who mainly founded small- and medium-sized enterprises in Chinese megacities such as Beijing, Chengdu, Chongqing, and Hangzhou. We introduce the sample and the background of each of the 25 women entrepreneurs included in our study in Table 2

Table 2. Background of women entrepreneurs included in this study

No	Age	Family Status	Child(ren)	Entrepreneurial			Education	Founder Type	Industry	Company Size*	Location	Set-up
				Family	Parents	Spouse						
IV01	26-30	Single	0	No	No	No	Highsc hool	Co- founder (sister)	Beauty and arts	Micro	Chengdu	2018
IV02	26-30	Single (divorced)	1	No	No	No	Master	Founder	Travel	Micro	Chengdu	2018
IV03	26-30	Partner	0	Yes	Yes (both)	No	Master	Co- founder (friend)	Food and beverage	Micro	Chengdu	2016
IV04	31-35	Married	0	No	No	No	Bachelor	Founder	Travel	Micro	Chengdu	2013
IV05	36-40	Married	1	No	No	No	Bachelor	Founder	E-commerce	Micro	Chengdu	2017
IV06	36-40	Married	0	No	No	No	Bachelor	Co- founder (colleague)	Consumer products	Micro	Chengdu	2018
IV07	26-30	Married	0	No	No	No	Master	Co- founder (friends)	Education	Small	Chengdu	2017
IV08	26-30	Married	0	Yes	Yes (both)	No	Bachelor	Co- founder (friend, colleague)	Food and beverage	Small	Chengdu	2020
IV09	31-35	Married	0	Yes	Yes (mother)	Yes	Bachelor	Co- founder (colleague)	Education	Small	Chengdu	2006
IV10	31-35	Married	2	No	No	No	Bachelor	Co- founder (colleague)	Education	Small	Chengdu	2013
IV11	26-30	Married	0	Yes	Yes (mother)	No	Master	Co- founder (mother)	Beauty and health	Micro	Chongqing	2021
IV12	36-40	Married	2	Yes	No	Yes	Bachelor	Co- founder (spouse, friend)	Hospitality	Large	Chongqing	2007
IV13	46-50	Single (divorced)	1	No	No	No	Master	Co- founder (brother)	Food and beverage	Large	Chongqing	2000
IV14	51-55	Single (widowed)	1	No	No	No	Master	Founder	Beauty	Large	Chongqing	1996
IV15	31-35	Single	0	No	No	No	Master	Co- founder (network)	Media	Micro	Beijing	2018
IV16	51-55	Married	0	Yes	Yes (mother)	Yes	Master, EMBA	Co- founder (spouse)	Consulting	Micro	Beijing	2008
IV17	26-30	Married	0	Yes	Yes (mother)	No	Master	Co- founder (network)	Artificial intelligence	Small	Beijing	2018
IV18	31-35	Married	0	No	No	No	Bachelor	Co- founder (friend)	Artificial intelligence	Small	Beijing	2013
IV19	36-40	Married	0	No	No	No	Bachelor	Founder	Media	Small	Beijing	2012
IV20	36-40	Married	1	No	No	Yes	Bachelor	Co-founder (spouse)	Big data	Small	Beijing	2008
IV21	36-40	Married	2	No	No	No	MBA	Co-founder (colleagues)	Consulting	Small	Beijing	2017
IV22	31-35	Married	1	No	No	Yes	Master, MBA	Co-founder (colleague, classmate)	Education	Medium	Beijing	2017
IV23	36-40	Married	2	No	No	Yes	Bachelor	Co-founder (classmates)	Software	Large	Hangzhou	2010
IV24	40-45	Divorced	1	No	No	No	Master, MBA	Founder	Education	Medium	Beijing	2009
IV25	40-45	Divorced	1	No	No	No	Bachelor	Co-founder (friends)	Food and beverage	Small	Chongqing	2014

Note. * Refers to business classification: Micro (1–10), small (10–49), medium (50–249), large (250+) employees (OECD 2023).

Data collection

To align with Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley (2021, 2022) ideal-type analysis, we use semi-structured interviews as our primary data sources. To support the analysis and better understand the interview data, we also collected observational data on women entrepreneurs and their interactions with family members, which were documented in a field diary as additional data sources.

The first author, who has a deep understanding of the country and is proficient in Chinese, conducted extensive field research in China from March 2019 to January 2020, spanning six months. During that time, most interviews with women entrepreneurs were held in Chinese, with a few in English. This was because the first author is not a native Chinese speaker, and some women entrepreneurs preferred speaking in English. With each interviewee's permission, interviews were audio-recorded, lasting between 45 and 240 minutes, accumulating over 36 hours of recordings. While in the field, the researcher observed interactions between women entrepreneurs and their family members during dinner meetings (IV01, IV03, IV14, IV16). These observations offered direct insights into family dynamics beyond the semi-structured interviews, adding depth to the data analysis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and international travel restrictions, the fieldwork shifted online, and data collection continued through WeChat until March 2021. As a result, no further observations of women entrepreneurs engaging with family members could be added as supplementary data.

The ideal-type analysis by Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley (2021, 2022) suggests that examining a medium to large number of cases ($n = 30+$) provides sufficient empirical evidence for developing our family support typology. In our study, we analyse interviews with 25 women entrepreneurs regarding the family support they received from their respective families. The women entrepreneurs discussed 81 family members (cases) in relation to their influence on the entrepreneurial process. By identifying ideal types, we find that analysing 81 family members is adequate for an ideal-type analysis.

Data analysis

The shift from data to theory is an ongoing process. To ensure rigour, researchers must be transparent about their data analysis procedures (Grodal, Anteby, and Holm 2021; Pratt, Kaplan, and Whittington 2020). Inductive theorizing is often seen as a core element of qualitative research (Bansal, Smith, and Vaara 2018). In our data analysis, we combine deductive and inductive reasoning to create a hybrid approach (Graebner, Martin, and Roundy 2012). Specifically, we begin by applying the family support in entrepreneurship conceptualization derived from our literature review to guide our coding of interview data. This predefined categorization of family support provides a basis for our analysis, enabling us to focus deductively on the theoretical relevance of the data before exploring it inductively (Linneberg and Korsgaard 2019). To promote transparency and give detailed insights into how we developed our ideal types, we now explain our application of the seven steps of ideal-type analysis and the underlying theoretical reasoning.

In the first step, we engaged with the interviews and other materials in the dataset. This involved organizing and transcribing interview data using MAXQDA software (VERBI Software 2021), adding field research notes, and reading and rereading the transcripts. In the second step, we summarized the key sections of the transcripts in MAXQDA relevant to understanding family support in women's entrepreneurship to create case reconstructions of the 25 women entrepreneurs in our sample. Afterwards, we coded the case reconstructions. The coding of interview data was guided by the family support conceptualization (deductive element) derived from our literature review on key works in the field of family support in entrepreneurship. During this process, we identified 81 family members mentioned by the women entrepreneurs. In our study context, we created case reconstructions for each of these family members, illustrating the family support dynamics involved. To enable better comparison of the cases and their elements later, we recorded information about the 81 family members and their family support in an Excel sheet. In the third step, we systematically compared the cases to identify differences and

similarities, aiming to establish ideal types for family support dynamics across the dataset (inductive element). To develop solid ideal types, we continued comparing until the emerging types were homogeneous internally and distinct from each other. This process resulted in four ideal family support types: Modernist, Modern Traditionalist, Fake Modernist, and Traditionalist. In the fourth step, we selected the best cases (optimal cases) representing each of the four ideal types, highlighting their key features. In the fifth step, we created detailed descriptions for each ideal type. In the sixth step, we assessed the credibility of these types. We used the ideal-type descriptions to categorize the family members into the four groups, discussing among all authors how clearly family members could be assigned to each type. Finally, in the seventh step, we compared the four ideal types to analyse their differences and similarities both among and within them.

Findings

Based on an ideal-type analysis, we identify four types of family support within a 2×2 family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix (modernist, modern traditionalist, fake modernist, and traditionalist), defined by two dimensions of approval and types of support. We first introduce the family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix, then examine the types of family support offered to women entrepreneurs in China. In our analysis, we highlight differences between family members with entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial backgrounds and explore how culture shapes the support they provide. The findings are presented according to recommendations for an ideal-type analysis (Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley 2021). This includes descriptions of the optimal cases, along with summaries of other cases that align with each ideal type. To emphasize the study's key qualitative findings and illustrate family support dynamics, we use 'power quotes' as Pratt (2009) suggests.

Ideal types of family support dynamics in China

We identify four types of family support within a 2×2 family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix [approval: yes or no; categories of support: none to multiple]: (I) *modernist* – approval is yes, and support is multiple, (II) *modern traditionalist* – approval is no, and support is multiple, (III) *fake modernist* – approval is yes, and support is none, and (IV) *traditionalist* – approval is no and support is none (see Figure 1). Figure 1 also highlights the specific kinds of support provided by the four ideal types of family members: none, instrumental, informational, and emotional support.

Table 3 classifies spouses, mothers, fathers, and in-laws as modernists, modern traditionalists, and traditionalists. Some spouses are categorized as fake modernists. Additionally, Table 3 distinguishes the backgrounds of these family members into entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial. For ideal types I (modernist) and IV (traditionalist), all family members – spouses, parents, in-laws – appear in this group. In contrast, for ideal type II (modern traditionalist), mainly parents and in-laws serve as this type. The ideal type III (fake modernists) applies only to spouses. Focusing on family member backgrounds (entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial), we see that family members in ideal types I, II, and III have both backgrounds, while only non-entrepreneurial family members fit ideal type IV.

The following sections explore the four ideal types and how various family members – spouses, mothers, fathers, and in-laws – shape women's entrepreneurship in China. It also examines how their backgrounds – whether entrepreneurial or non-entrepreneurial – and cultural embeddedness influence the approval and support they offer. Our analysis shows how the family members' backgrounds interact with the types of support provided and cultural norms, including perceptions of women's gender roles, which in turn influence approval or disapproval of entrepreneurship.

Ideal type [I]: modernist

Modernists support their female family members' entrepreneurial efforts and offer essential support – instrumental, informational, and emotional – throughout their journey as women

entrepreneurs. Family members who act as modernists include spouses, mothers, fathers, and in-laws (see Table 3). The optimal case involves an entrepreneurial father, IV03; see the section below on the influence of parents.

Spouse. Women entrepreneurs highlight situations where their non-entrepreneurial spouses played a crucial role in helping them overcome resistance in their entrepreneurial journey, which often stems from traditional cultural norms and the pressure to meet expectations as ideal daughters and daughters-in-law. For example, Mandy's (IV22) spouse provided strong emotional support when no one in her family wanted her to become an entrepreneur, preferring she focus on her family role. Mandy's spouse, who is not an entrepreneur himself, offered emotional support by encouraging her to persevere: 'Follow your heart and prioritize your own choices, regardless of family opinions'.

Compared to non-entrepreneurial spouses acting as modernists, entrepreneurial spouses provide a wider range of emotional, instrumental, and informational support. For example, Diana (IV19) can receive relevant informational support from her spouse by discussing business and management issues, leveraging his own entrepreneurial experience. Additionally, her spouse listens and offers emotional support by encouraging her to keep going with entrepreneurship, even when she faces challenges.

Parents. Non-entrepreneurial mothers usually focus on instrumental support, such as childcare and household chores, along with providing emotional backing. For example, Celeste's mother (IV10), who lives in the same household, helps her with childcare for her two kids, giving her more flexibility and time for her business. Living arrangements with parents like this have long been considered the cultural norm in China (Yu and Xie 2018), making it easier to provide this kind of instrumental support.

Entrepreneurial parents who act as modernists focus on providing various types of instrumental, informational, and emotional support. However, when it comes to instrumental support, they tend to spend less time on childcare and household chores. For example, Cecilia's (IV11) entrepreneurial mother offers crucial instrumental support by giving Cecilia exclusive access to contacts and networks she would otherwise be unable to reach: 'I can use my mother's brand to make more connections and to do my own marketing'. Especially in the Chinese context, the access provided by Cecilia's entrepreneurial mothers is particularly valuable for Cecilia's entrepreneurial efforts because the role of personal networks and relationships, known as 'guanxi', is important for conducting business and entrepreneurship (Burt and Burzynska 2017).

Such support is reflected by entrepreneurial fathers. Acting as a modernist, Amy's (IV03) entrepreneurial father not only approved of her becoming an entrepreneur but also provided essential instrumental support. When she launched her business, her entrepreneurial father offered contacts and networking opportunities through introductions:

> 'Even when I was in high school and just starting college, I had random ideas. No matter if my dad thinks it is a stupid [business] idea or believes it could work, he will take the time to reach out to his friends [who are in the industry]'.

Furthermore, Amy's father provides informational support by serving as a role model. Amy explained that her father and mother, who ran a joint business, alternated in leading roles, demonstrating shared family and gender roles within entrepreneurial households, leaving a lasting impression on her.

Entrepreneurial mothers also act as role models for their daughters. Cecilia's (IV11) emphasizes how the informational support from her mother's entrepreneurial journey influences her own entrepreneurial path.

> 'I think I am a bit lucky. Our family already has a successful entrepreneur. I can discuss business matters with her when I do not know what I should do'. [. . .] She believes I can experience the challenges of starting a business and find my own path in life. [. . .] I think that as the daughter of such an outstanding woman, I must realize my own ideas'.

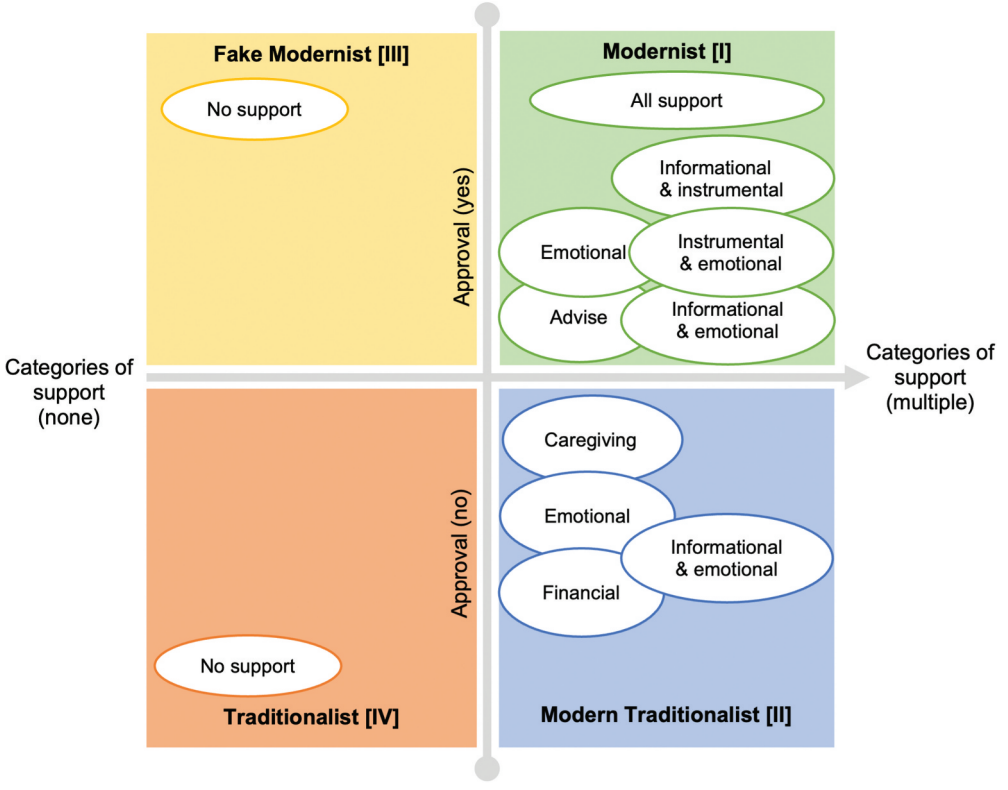

Figure 1. Family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix.

Table 3. Overview of the family members and the ideal family support types they belong to.

			Ideal family support types			
			[I] Modernist	[II] Modern traditionalist	[III] Fake modernist	[IV] Traditionalist
Family members	Spouse		E* 7	E 0	E 1	E 0
			NE* 9	NE 0	NE 4	NE 3
	Parents	Mother	E 4	E 3	E 0	E 0
			NE 5	NE 5	NE 0	NE 6
		Father	E 3	E 1	E 0	E 0
			NE 5	NE 5	NE 0	NE 6
	In-laws	Mother-in-law	E 0	E 0	E 0	E 0
			NE 2	NE 2	NE 0	NE 1
		Father-in-law	E 0	E 0	E 0	E 0
			NE 2	NE 1	NE 0	NE 1
	Other (sister, brother, cousin, uncle, daughter)		E 4	E 0	E 0	E 0
			NE 0	NE 0	NE 0	NE 1
Total	*n* = 81		n = 41	n = 17	n = 5	n = 18

Note. *E = entrepreneurial, NE = non-entrepreneurial.

In-laws. Similar to non-entrepreneurial parents, non-entrepreneurial in-laws live in the same household as their daughter-in-law because, historically, women in China were expected to move in with their in-laws after marriage (Gruijters and Ermisch 2019). These living arrangements provide instrumental support such as childcare and handling household chores. For example, Demi's (IV21) in-laws not only support her entrepreneurship but also help her family by managing childcare for her two children and household tasks, allowing her to focus fully on her business: 'My life is challenging, but

my parents-in-law assist me in caring for my kids. They prepare their meals, help organize and wash their clothes, and pick them up from school'.

Ideal type [II]: modern traditionalist

Modern traditionalists disapprove of their female family members pursuing entrepreneurship because of deeply rooted traditional gender roles and family expectations. However, they provide support – instrumental, informational, and emotional – to their entrepreneurial family members during critical moments. We identified mothers, fathers, and in-laws but no spouses acting as modern traditionalists (see Table 3). The optimal case: a non-entrepreneurial mother, IV07; see the section below.

Parents. We identify entrepreneurial mothers and fathers who embody traditional gender role expectations towards their daughters, leading to disapproval of entrepreneurial activities despite being entrepreneurs themselves. Growing up in an entrepreneurial family, Jasmine (IV04) noted that her mother disapproves of her entrepreneurial journey and emphasized, 'my mother thinks that I am not very strong, and I should prioritize the family', reflecting her mother's expectation that Jasmine cares for her spouse and also gives birth to a child. Also, Kate (IV16), who grew up in rural China where traditional cultural norms tend to be more prevalent, explained that her mother, despite having had her own business, opposed her becoming an entrepreneur since she perceived entrepreneurship as unsuitable for her daughter: 'My mother does not want me to become an entrepreneur, but I think her actions speak louder than her words. She was an entrepreneur herself. So, I think I can become an entrepreneur too, even without her encouragement'. Although these mothers disapprove of their daughters' entrepreneurial activities, they still offer different types of support, utilizing their own entrepreneurial backgrounds. For instance, Kate's (IV16) mother provided informational support by sharing entrepreneurial experiences and expressed emotional support through empathy and understanding.

The reasons for disapproving of their daughters' entrepreneurial activities based on traditional cultural norms are also expressed by women entrepreneurs who have non-entrepreneurial mothers. For example, Xenia's (IV07) non-entrepreneurial mother wanted her to follow traditional gender roles and embody the image of an 'ideal' daughter and wife. Xenia reflected on a conversation with her mother where she said: 'Why do you want to start a business? You are a woman. You should follow our traditions and simply be a beautiful woman. You have studied abroad, and you own a house and a car, so why would you want to engage in such a miserable thing [entrepreneurship]?' (IV07). Since Xenia is already married and has no children, she feels pressure from her mother to prioritize caring for her spouse and family over pursuing entrepreneurship, conforming to her mother's expectations. Nevertheless, despite her more traditional views on women's roles within families, Xenia's mother still provided crucial instrumental support by providing the initial financial resources necessary to start her business.

Such actions can also be seen in non-entrepreneurial fathers who act as modern traditionalists. When Candra (IV02) started her first business in her mid-20s, she had just gone through a divorce and was raising a one-year-old child. Candra's father could not understand why she wanted to focus on her career as an entrepreneur instead of following traditional cultural norms and putting her family first. Even though he disapproved of her entrepreneurial pursuits, her non-entrepreneurial father still provided essential support by giving her initial financial resources and emotional encouragement, which helped her launch her first business.

In-laws. The support that non-entrepreneurial in-laws provide to women entrepreneurs mainly focuses on helping with childcare and household chores. Xara's (IV12) in-laws offer essential support in these areas. However, as modern traditionalists, they disapprove of her entrepreneurial ventures. Xara's in-laws, who grew up in rural Chongqing and are described by her as holding traditional views on gender roles, expect her to adhere to their expectations of an ideal daughter-in-law. Xara, who

runs a joint business with her husband, explains that she feels pressured by her in-laws to prioritize her family and support her spouse. Although she enjoys building her business, these circumstances ultimately led her to retire by her mid-30s to conform to traditional roles and focus on her children's education.

Ideal type [III]: fake modernist

Fake modernists are family members who pretend to support women entrepreneurs but fail to provide essential family support (instrumental, informational, or emotional) because of deeply rooted traditional gender roles and family expectations. We identified spouses (both entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial) acting as fake modernists (see Table 3). The optimal case: non-entrepreneurial spouse, IV08; refer to the section below.

Spouse. Both entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial spouses who act as fake modernists tend to give approval, but women entrepreneurs in our sample perceive this approval as insincere. Furthermore, this approval does not translate into actual support for women entrepreneurs. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic showed how Jamie's (IV20) entrepreneurial spouse, who is also her co-founder, expected her to follow traditional gender roles in their relationship. Specifically, during the lockdowns, with schools closed, Jamie had to run their business during a crisis while also managing childcare on her own.

> I sacrifice more because we are co-founders. That is the reality. My husband works, [. . .] but I sacrifice my work for my family. [. . .] as women, we have certain obligations to society. I do not want that. I do not invest my full energy into my work, but I do not have any choice right now.

In this situation, she accepted the underlying family dynamics rooted in traditional spousal roles.

The approval or lack of support from entrepreneurial spouses is reflected in non-entrepreneurial spouses. Amelie (IV08) explains that although her non-entrepreneurial partner explicitly approves of her entrepreneurial journey, she 'cannot feel it' and does not see any sign of support in his actions when it matters. She highlighted that her partner wants 'girls [her] to focus on the family'.

Ideal type [IV]: traditionalist

Traditional family members disapprove of women entrepreneurs and do not offer support because of traditional gender roles and family expectations. This behaviour actively creates barriers for women entrepreneurs. A closer look at the backgrounds of these family members shows that all who act as traditionalists in our sample are non-entrepreneurial.

We identified spouses, parents, and in-laws acting as traditionalists (see Table 3). Optimal case: non-entrepreneurial spouse, IV05; see the section below on the influence of spouses.

Spouses. Women entrepreneurs married to traditionalists illustrate the cultural barriers imposed by their spouses. For instance, Mary's (IV05) spouse strongly disapproved of her business activities because he wanted her to conform to his idea of a 'perfect' wife and homemaker rather than pursuing a trivial and 'useless' business idea: 'They [your family members] see you as a mother of a child, so you can only take care of the child, wash clothes, cook, and do household-related tasks'. He even threw all the skincare products she sold on the floor, saying, 'Do not do this [entrepreneurship]. You must stay at home. Otherwise, there is no one to cook and take care of our children!' Mary's spouse grew up in rural Sichuan, where these traditional gender role expectations are more widely considered the cultural norm. Despite the tensions it creates in their relationship, Mary actively resists her spouse's expectation that she be a homemaker to pursue her entrepreneurial path.

Parents. Non-entrepreneurial fathers and mothers acting as traditionalists neither approve of nor support their daughters' entrepreneurial pursuits. Magdalena (IV15) described her dad as a 'chauvinist' who 'always wanted to have a son so that a son can hold up the family and showed in his actions that he believes women cannot do this'. His gender roles and expectations for women, including the belief that entrepreneurship is an unsuitable path for his daughter, were concrete.

When Magdalena founded her company, she explained that she and her father could not have a full conversation or spend more than a week together without arguing about her decision to become an entrepreneur. Gloria (IV18) describes her mother as very traditional and explained that her mother's lack of approval or support is rooted in traditional gender roles for women stemming from her upbringing in rural Inner Mongolia.

In-laws. In-laws acting as traditionalists also disapprove of entrepreneurship and offer no support. Despite living in the same household, Mandy's (IV22) in-laws do not even provide instrumental support by caring for her two children. They believe their daughter-in-law should focus on caring for their son and the rest of the family.

The shifts in family support for entrepreneurship in China

We identified illustrative cases where the support from family members and their approval of entrepreneurial activities changed during the entrepreneurial journey due to influences stemming from their cultural embeddedness in broader societal norms and attitudes: (1) shifting from approval and support to disapproval and lack of support (IV06 mother and father), and (2) shifting from no approval and no support to approval and support (IV05 spouse, IV15 father).

(1) *From approval and support to disapproval and lack of support*. Kelly's case (IV06) illustrates how parents (modernists) initially supported and endorsed entrepreneurship but later withdrew their support and disapproved (traditionalists) due to the loss of family status within the community tied to societal norms and attitudes. Support and approval from her father and mother ceased when Kelly's business faced a crisis and bankruptcy. Instead of providing emotional and informational support during this tough time, that support was absent; her parents felt embarrassed by their daughter, as their family was losing status and respect in society. Despite being capable, they did not offer either emotional or informational support when she needed it. This contrasts with the time when Kelly launched her business, and her non-entrepreneurial father provided both emotional and informational support. As an experienced company manager with over 2000 employees, Kelly's father shared business advice and his experiences. Additionally, when she started her business, her parents expressed pride, including speaking positively about their daughter outside the family circle. Kelly's case highlights how family members can change the support they give in response to societal feedback influenced by their cultural values. The daughter's entrepreneurial success can impact the social status of the entire family, which, in the Chinese context shaped by traditional Chinese values, can significantly influence the type of support family members are willing to offer. These shifts can be linked to cultural features deeply embedded in Chinese society that we observe in the data, such as the concept of 'face' (mianzi), which refers to the 'recognition by others of one's social standing and position' (Lockett 1988, 488).

(2) *From lacking approval and support to gaining both*. Magdalena's case (IV15) and Mary's case (IV05), introduced earlier, illustrate how a family member (traditionally) initially neither offers support nor approval but becomes highly supportive and approving during the women entrepreneurs' (modernists) journey. Both cases show that family members' views of cultural norms can shift through interactions with their entrepreneurial relatives, in this case, the daughter and wife, which then impact the support they provide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Magdalena stayed with her family for several months. She used this time to speak daily with her father about her entrepreneurial journey. These conversations helped him realize that 'it doesn't matter whether it's a daughter or son supporting a family; however, for a 'chauvinist father, this was quite a process'. Even his opinion of his wife, daughter, and other women evolved. Now, Magdalena and her father discuss strategic business issues, and he offers her emotional support.

We previously discussed Mary (IV05) and showed how her non-entrepreneurial spouse strongly disapproved of her business efforts because he wanted her to meet his expectations of a wife and homemaker. As Mary's business grew more successful and became financially sustainable, her spouse recognized the positive financial impact on the family and changed his attitude towards her. He started actively supporting her with childcare and discussing business topics with her: 'I believe in your ability, I believe in your strength; if you want to do this, go for it. You can do whatever you want, and I do not want to be the same as before' (IV05).

These examples of family support shifts illustrate how family support is influenced by feedback from the cultural context of family members, and how their perceptions of cultural norms can change, which then impacts the support they offer.

Discussion

Theoretical implications and contributions

Cultural embeddedness and family support for entrepreneurship—ideal types of family-to-entrepreneurship support

The interaction between gender and culture actively shapes gender roles, expectations, and identities (Bullough et al. 2022). Societies are categorized as traditional or modern, creating a dichotomy (Thornton 2013). Scholars see tradition and modernity as forming a 'dynamic relationship that varies across time and context, influencing individuals' motivations regarding family behaviour in different societies' (Ji 2015, 1062).

Our study identifies four ideal types representing either alignment or mismatch in gender roles, expectations, and identities among women entrepreneurs in China and their family members. In this context, women entrepreneurs and their modernist family members demonstrate harmony in their gender roles, expectations, and identities (such as daughters, daughters-in-law, and wives), which fosters approval and support for women's entrepreneurial endeavours in China. Conversely, modern traditionalist, fake modernist, and traditionalist family members exhibit mismatches in gender roles, expectations, and identities, leading to ongoing tensions between women entrepreneurs and their families: (1) spouse – woman entrepreneur: mismatch in expected roles within the spousal relationship and family setting (e.g. wife and homemaker versus women entrepreneurs and potential breadwinners), (2) parents – woman entrepreneur: mismatch in parental expectations for their daughter to conform (e.g. being a highly educated and beautiful daughter, a caring mother and wife versus prioritizing entrepreneurship over family responsibilities), and (3) in-laws – woman entrepreneur: mismatch in in-laws' expectations (the daughter-in-law should care for their son and the family versus the daughter-in-law pursuing entrepreneurship at the expense of family involvement).

With our overarching ideal types of family-to-entrepreneurship support in China, we distinguish between modernists, modern traditionalists, fake modernists, and traditionalists, highlighting the different roles of family members within a patriarchal society. Our findings suggest that China presents a scenario in which the country is both modern and traditional, and that families respond differently to support entrepreneurial women. China is not a monolithic culture where gender is treated and socially constructed uniformly in all situations. Our ideal-type analysis reveals how family support and gender are intertwined in societies undergoing significant change at the intersection of modernity and tradition, often leading to tensions between women entrepreneurs and their family members. This emphasizes the importance of moving beyond a simplified binary view of societies to recognize the diversity of family and gender roles within and across countries.

The multidimensionality of family-to-entrepreneurship support

Our study emphasizes the importance of various dimensions in shaping family support dynamics in entrepreneurship by understanding how different aspects of family support are interconnected. We

identified four main dimensions: (1) categories of family-to-entrepreneurship support provided (no support, instrumental, informational, emotional), (2) family members' approval (none or yes), (3) background of family members (entrepreneurial or non-entrepreneurial), and (4) cultural embeddedness. Additionally, we find that changes in family support can be connected to family members' cultural embeddedness and their evolving perceptions. With this multidimensional approach, especially by including cultural embeddedness, we present an integrated view of family support in entrepreneurship, a topic that has received less focus in the literature.

The role of spousal support in women's entrepreneurship – distinguishing between non-entrepreneurial and entrepreneurial spouses

Studies highlight forms of spousal support in entrepreneurial processes (Wolf and Frese 2018), emphasizing the 'not so silent role' of spouses and the connection between entrepreneurial and spousal roles (Mathias and Wang 2023). The literature explicitly notes that entrepreneurial men often take their spouses' 'silent support' for granted (Hytti, Karhunen, and Radu-Lefebvre 2024). Unlike earlier research on spousal interference, we can differentiate between non-entrepreneurial and entrepreneurial spouses who provide support and approval. We contribute to the literature by showing that both entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial spouses can help women entrepreneurs overcome family barriers in patriarchal societies. Additionally, we contribute to the literature by highlighting the negative role of spouses in entrepreneurship, demonstrating that spouses who act as detractors can impede their partners' entrepreneurial efforts.

Different roles of parental family support in women's entrepreneurship include both entrepreneurial mothers and fathers

The entrepreneurship literature has thoroughly examined how entrepreneurial parents influence their children to pursue entrepreneurship. Some studies show that successful entrepreneurial parents increase the likelihood that their children will enter entrepreneurship (Mungai and Velamuri 2011), while other research highlights a gendered influence of parents on the decision to start a business (Chlosta et al. 2012; Hoffmann, Junge, and Malchow-Møller 2015; Kirkwood 2007). However, the literature on family support in entrepreneurship usually refers to 'parents' without distinguishing the specific support provided by entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial fathers and mothers.

Our study of women entrepreneurs in China clarifies the roles of fathers and mothers in their entrepreneurial journeys. First, we show that non-entrepreneurial mothers in China mainly provide instrumental support, such as childcare, to women entrepreneurs with children, often living with them. They also frequently offer essential financial support for starting a business. Second, non-entrepreneurial fathers typically provide both instrumental support (financial resources, childcare) and emotional support (encouragement, positive regard, understanding). Entrepreneurial mothers especially deliver emotional support (encouragement, positive regard, listening, understanding, and empathy) along with instrumental support in the form of financial resources. Entrepreneurial fathers offer critical instrumental support (introductions, financial resources), informational support (advice and ideas), and emotional support (encouragement) to their daughters. However, we also identify both mothers and fathers as potential obstacles, actively hindering their daughters' entrepreneurial processes.

The role of in-laws in women's entrepreneurship

The influence of in-laws in entrepreneurial processes has received less focus in entrepreneurship research. In-laws can provide essential instrumental support by giving access to networks or skills and offering informational support for generating ideas (Anderson, Jack, and Dodd 2005). In patriarchal societies, mothers-in-law are often viewed as obstacles, hindering their daughters-in-law from pursuing entrepreneurship (Karim et al. 2023). However, a study by Azmat and Fujimoto (2016) highlights the importance of living in 'joint family' arrangements with in-laws and emphasizes

their instrumental support in childcare and household chores. Our study contributes to this understanding by showing that in-laws offer instrumental support in childcare and household tasks, especially through co-living. Although they often disapprove of their daughters-in-law starting businesses, they still provide vital instrumental support, enabling their daughters-in-law to focus on their ventures.

Family support in women's entrepreneurship across the rural-urban divide

Studies on urbanization and household gender inequalities in China show that urbanization helps reduce traditional gendered divisions of labour within families (de Bruin and Liu 2020). However, tensions still remain among family members and women entrepreneurs, particularly when entrepreneurs migrate from rural areas to urban centres in China. Our research contributes to the literature on women entrepreneurs who relocate while remaining part of the patriarchal family system of their place of origin (Ram, Jones, and Villares-Varela 2017). We demonstrate how women moving from rural regions to Chinese megacities continue to face inherited traditional gender roles and family expectations despite living in urban environments.

Practical implications

Strategies for women entrepreneurs to manage limited family support

Depending on family dynamics and the environments these women entrepreneurs operate in, they find themselves in either modernist-oriented family settings that balance modernity and traditionalism or in more traditional family structures. Although this study does not mainly focus on it, we found that women entrepreneurs needing support often build networks of advisors and fellow entrepreneurs beyond their family ties or reach out to more supportive relatives. To address a lack of instrumental support from family members, especially in childcare, household chores, or children's education, women entrepreneurs hire external help (e.g. housekeepers, nannies, tutors) if they have the financial means. This allows them to offset the absence of instrumental family support. To overcome a lack of informational and emotional support from family members, women entrepreneurs actively seek mentorship and advice from other entrepreneurs within women's entrepreneurship associations and communities.

Limitations and future research directions

We offer a perspective on how family support for entrepreneurship is experienced in an emerging patriarchal economy undergoing societal change. While our focus is on the family support discussed in our study, we acknowledge that we did not interview the family members who provided support or those who did not. We do not believe that the interviewees withheld information about their family members; instead, they shared their stories authentically, revealing very private details about family support dynamics that could also have been concealed in interviews with family members. However, focusing solely on women entrepreneurs' perspectives may introduce bias into the understanding of family support dynamics. Therefore, including the perspectives of family members who support women entrepreneurs in future research could help researchers gain deeper insights into their involvement and the dynamics at play.

Additionally, this approach would allow triangulation of narratives from women entrepreneurs and their families. When researchers develop ideal-type analyses during the analytical process (Stapley, O'Keeffe, and Midgley 2021, 2022), they incorporate their own interpretations into the data analysis. We aimed to be as reflective and transparent as possible in constructing these ideal types, while acknowledging that, as researchers, we inevitably bring our own interpretations to the data.

Our study highlights several research directions for future work. We show that women entrepreneurs often lack approval or support from family members, yet they still proceed to

start their businesses. Additionally, we reveal that family support and approval for women entrepreneurs can change over time. This prompts several questions for future research: (1) Why do women become and remain entrepreneurs despite these challenges? (2) How do women entrepreneurs cope with family disapproval and the lack of family support during their entrepreneurial journey? (3) Who do women entrepreneurs rely on if not their family? (4) What conditions lead to changes in family support and approval? and (5) What is needed to shift the view of family support in entrepreneurship from a binary perspective in modern and patriarchal societies?

Since this study interviewed women entrepreneurs who started businesses, we cannot provide insights into whether different kinds of family support hinder the creation and growth of new ventures over time. One case we observed, in which the absence of family support led the woman entrepreneur to 'retire' from her business, indicates that future research on emerging entrepreneurs may reveal varying rates of entrepreneurship depending on the four ideal types of family support outlined in our family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix.

Conclusion

This paper explored how gender and culture shape the reception of family support in entrepreneurship in emerging economies with a patriarchal tradition. Additionally, we identified the key supporters of women entrepreneurs in these societies and the types of family support they receive. We began with a review of the literature on family support in entrepreneurship, emphasizing the categories of instrumental, informational, and emotional support, while highlighting the importance of integrating these elements to address both culture and gender within a theoretical family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix. We also contextualized women's entrepreneurship and the role of family in patriarchal societies, using China as the focal point of our study. Our research identifies spouses, mothers, fathers, and in-laws as key family members, underscoring their various roles – enablers and detractors – in the entrepreneurial process in China. Our efforts resulted in a 2×2 family-to-entrepreneurship support matrix (modernist, modern traditionalist, fake modernist, traditionalist) that details the family support provided to women entrepreneurs in an emerging economy with a patriarchal tradition undergoing significant change at the intersection of traditionalism and modernity. We highlight four dimensions that characterize the dynamics of family support for business: (1) support categories provided (none, instrumental, informational, emotional), (2) approval from family members (either no or yes), (3) background of family members (entrepreneurial or non-entrepreneurial), and (4) a cultural embeddedness dimension (evolving) – the cultural embeddedness of family members impacts family-to-entrepreneurship support. We recommend using qualitative methods that incorporate longitudinal study elements. Investigating family support and approval, as well as the conditions under which these factors persist or change over time – especially as the needs of the venture and entrepreneurs evolve (e.g. as businesses grow, face crises, or experience changes in family structure) – may enhance our comprehensive understanding of family support in entrepreneurial processes.

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