Exploring Female Leadership Advancement in Chinese Corporations:

Selection for Senior Positions through Headhunting

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ABSTRACT

Leadership diversity has evoked tremendous debate for decades. This includes the profitability and creativity of organizations and the realization of social capital. In this regard, governments have initiated numerous programs to increase gender equality in leadership positions. A wealth of academic research has also been conducted to investigate factors influencing the paucity of women in the elite leadership group. One noticeable element at the organizational level is the way in which female leaders are selected. Given the increasing proportion of leadership selection conducted through headhunters, this thesis aims at investigating how headhunting influences female leadership progression in the Chinese context.

Because the research focuses on meanings and interpretations of female headhunting practices, it employed a qualitative methodology. Consequently, 13 in-depth interviews were carried out in China. In order to make the results more representative, the diverse sample was dispersed not only in Mainland China but in Taiwan. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to gain a deep understanding of how females are selected as well as the underlying elements that can exert influence on the selection results.

The findings revealed that the headhunting of female leaders is not a simple or straightforward process. It is influenced by contextual constraints, the recruitment and selections used by headhunters, and no doubt, headhunters' competency. Also, these issues are influenced by cultural beliefs, economic, and political factors in the Chinese context. Among them, political factors are powerful and interact with cultural and economic factors. They produce gendered results.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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List of Abbreviations

CEO   Chief Executive Officer

COO   Chief Operating Officer

CFO   Chief Financial Officer

ESFs   Executive Search Firms

FTSE   Financial Times Stock Exchange

HR   Human Resources

ILO   International Labour Organization

JD   Job Description

MNCs   Multi-national corporations

MOHRSS Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China

OECD   Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

PJ   Person-Job

PO   Person-Organization

PRC   People's Republic of China

R&S   Recruitment and Selection

WLB   Work Life Balance

US   United States

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study explores how headhunting, as an executive search and selection method, influences the advancement of female leaders in Chinese corporations. This thesis offers insights through the perspective of headhunters, to make sense of the influence of each party (firms, candidates and headhunters) involved in the selection procedure in female leaders' career progression.

This chapter explains why the research was conducted and the way in which it was carried out. It discusses the research questions and objectives, describes the context in which the research was conducted, presents contributions of this research, and outlines the structure of this thesis.

1.2 Aim of the Study

Leadership diversity has attracted worldwide attention for decades since organizations with diverse workforces are more likely to obtain high effectiveness as 'business case' advocates (Kochan et al., 2003). The majority of debates on leadership diversity are related to gender equality in senior managerial positions (Brands and Fernandez-Mateo, 2017). A significant body of research has investigated the underlying causes of the persistent under-representation of female leaders. Key findings include organizational cultures that encourage masculine leadership (Billing 2011; Ely et al. 2011), and double standards in evaluating the competency of males and females. However, the majority of researchers have ignored the role that external professionals, especially headhunters, play in the selection of senior positions to (Doldor et al 2012). External professionals need for confidentiality may be one of the reasons why (Finlay & Overdill, 2002; Garrison, 2005).

China, as one of the most influential countries in the world, with increasing political and economic significance, has been paid considerable attention by the academic world (Cooke, 2003). However, research in the field of women's leadership equality remains less developed. Chinese women make up 45 percent of the workforce and have one of the highest participation rates in full-time employment in the world, but only 19 of senior management positions are held by women, and the majority of those are at the functional level, such as finance directors, human resources directors, and chief operating officers (Liu, 2013). Also, the executive search industry engages with numerous issues related to both socio-cultural and societal conditions where headhunters interact with their clients and candidates (Tienari et al. 2013). China has authoritarian policies, and thousands years of Confucian heritage. Headhunters, as filters and mediators of female leadership progression are salient in this context.

1.3 Research Design

This study addresses the gap by exploring headhunters' selection of women leaders and the underlying factors that influence this practice in the context of China. This was achieved by conducting 13 in-depth interviews with 11 Chinese headhunters and 2 Taiwanese headhunters. Through empirical findings, this study makes several contributions. Firstly, it presents a better understanding of the mechanism for headhunting female leaders in the context of China. Secondly, it offers new insights for both scholars and practitioners into the way in which the underlying factors influence the selection of senior leadership posts in China. It also identifies opportunities and obstacles that headhunters may provide in the selection of women leaders for senior positions and makes recommendations about how female leaders can successfully advance their careers.

1.4. Research Question and Objectives

This thesis seeks to address and discuss how headhunting influences the advancement of female leadership in Chinese corporations by answering the research question:

In what way does headhunting affect the advancement of female leadership in corporations in China?

The research objectives are to:

1. identify the processes for headhunting female leaders in China;

2. identify underlying factors influencing headhunting practices for female leaders;

3. examine the extent to which headhunters hinder or enable the advancement of women in leadership positions.

1.5 Executive Search Industry and Chinese Context

The emergence of headhunters is derived from two key changes in contemporary society: the knowledge economy (Michaelsetal，2001) which depends on the supply of talent to secure the economic success of a business, and the deregulation of the labor market. This is manifested in the decline of a 'job for life' and unrestricted labour mobility that contributes to the worldwide search for talent (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). With these changes in the labor market, space was created for Executive Search Firms (ESFs) to act as intermediaries between clients' organizations seeking talent to fill managerial positions and candidates, defined as those with the competence sought for leadership jobs (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). In this sense, headhunters are regarded as independent and confidential external service bodies with specific norms of professionalism (Beaverstock et al., 2014).

Khurana (2002) divides the role of headhunters into three categories, namely

coordination, mediation and legitimation. Manfredi et al., (2019, p. 5) further develop these roles into five key activities:

- mapping the market and searching for candidates;

- coordinating the recruitment process, identifying and attracting top talent;

- mediating to attract candidates in a more discreet manner, without arousing competitors' attention;

- enabling clients to conceal the "raiding [of] their rivals and clients for employees" (Finlay and Coverdill 1999, p. 26);

- supporting candidates through the process, ultimately fostering gradual commitment between the corporate client and the candidate (Hamori 2010).

There are two opposing arguments about the role of headhunters in gender leadership equality. The first argument is that headhunters are very influential in the elite labor market, and therefore, can significantly affect the gender balance at the managerial level. For example, 'war for talent' arguments propose that search firms create a position of power in elite labor markets by formulating a 'new boys network', in which those who have close connections are provided with more opportunities (Gayle et al., 2012). Therefore, the social networks of headhunters, to a great extent, disadvantage women who are excluded from these networks (Tienari et al., 2013). Some argue that headhunters exert great influence in defining key attributes of the ideal candidate (Faulconbridge et al., 2009), which are gender-biased (Tienari et al., 2013). The second argument argue is that headhunters have lost their position in the labor market because the main decision-makers in recruitment and selection are the principals in client companies (Meriläinen et al., 2013). Therefore, headhunters cannot determine gender issues in leadership recruitment and selection. For instance, Charan (2005) argues that "no executive recruiter can grasp the subtleties of a client's business as well as the client". Regarding outcomes of headhunting processes may be similar across countries, but discourses on the reasons vary (Tienari et al. 2013), the next section presents the

key features of the executive search industry in the context of China.

The executive search industry has experienced three main stages of development in China. The first stage began in1992 when the first headhunting business was formally established by a Singapore-owned company, and is considered the exploration stage. In 1996, the industry stepped into the development stage with an increase in attention paid by both government and the market. In this period, the number of headhunting firms increased dramatically. The last stage commenced in 2004 when the search industry gained tremendous opportunities with China's rapid economic growth. This is defined as the expansion stage (iResearch, 2016). Since the absence of regulation at the beginning, the low barriers to entry meant that numerous searching firms are poorly qualified (Zhou&Zeng, 2008). This accompanied by the lack of effective monitoring mechanisms means service quality varies greatly. The first regulations about the exective search industry were published in 2006 as Executive Talents Search Service Regulations (MOHRSS, n.d.). They were established to guide the talent search industry to be as mature as other professional services like accountants and lawyers. Second, the composition of the search industry is diverse, and, therefore, market shares are unequally distributed. Various types of talent search firms exist in China, ranging from large global search firms, such as Korn Ferry, to one-person enterprises (iResearh, 2016). The five largest executive search firms only accounted for 5 percent of market share while domestic private companies made up the overwhelming proportion of talent markets (iResearh, 2016).

Compared with Mainland China, Taiwan, as a special district, has a number of distinctive social-political and economic features, despite sharing similar cultural values.

Taiwan legislated talent-searching as a legal service in 1989, at which time the search business was professionalised. The Employment Services Act was promulgated in 1992, which established comprehensive regulations for talent search services, such as no discrimination on the grounds of gender and age. The market share of talent-searching

is widely distributed, as in Britain and France (the five big headhunting companies: Korn/Ferry, Heidrick&Struggles, Spencer Stuart, Egon Zehnder, Russell Reynolds occupied 6 percent and 9 percent of the market share), due to the existence of a variety of search firms (Yu, 2015).

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This chapter presents the aim of this research by identifying the research gap. It also provides background about both Chinese and Taiwan headhunting industry.

Chapter Two analyses the academic literature on barriers to female leadership advancement, recruitment and selection, headhunting procedures, and how leaders are selected by headhunters through a gender equality perspective. Chapter Three discusses the methodology of this research. First, the interpretive paradigm directing this thesis is illustrated. Reasons for choosing a qualitative approach and interviews are explained. In addition, the researcher provides a detailed description of how the data was analysed as well as how to address concerns about rigour. Ethical considerations are discussed and the limitations of the research are considered. Chapter Four outlines the findings and Chapter Five compares similarities and contradictions between the literature and the research findings. Following this, the underlying factors that exert an impact on the headhunting of female leaders in the context of China are identified. Chapter Six concludes this research by addressing the research question. Additionally, the researcher's reflection is put forward. Subsequently, research contributions are put forward. Research limitations are presented accompanied by areas for future research. Finally, suggestions for female leadership development through headhunting are made on the governmental, organizational, and individual levels.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter begins with the analysis of general gender bias, including discrimination, sociological pressures, and economic issues. Then systemic recruitment and selection are illustrated, along with the procedure of headhunting. Finally, headhunting practice is discussed from the point of view of gender to identify issues arising for female leadership upward mobility.

2.1 Gender Bias in General

The literature on women's leadership development spans several decades. This body of research provides a rich array of explanations for the underrepresentation of women in management positions. Several metaphors have been chosen to illustrate obstacles inhibiting women's career advancement, such as a labyrinth, glass ceiling, glass cliff, concrete wall and sticky floor (Ryan et al., 2011; Carli and Eagly, 2016). It can be concluded, therefore, that different factors and dimensions lead to the scarcity of women in leadership positions, especially top management positions. The research shows that these factors are intertwined and interact with each other. Among them, the most frequently mentioned barriers are discrimination against women leaders in the workplace (Peus et al.2015), sociological pressures (Cooke, 2003) and economic issues, often resulting in a pay gap between men and women (Xiu & Gunderson, 2014). The following section concentrates on illustrating and analysing those factors, and further discusses them in the context of China.

2.1.1. Discrimination

As one of the predominant obstacles to a female career path, discrimination is analysed by a great number of scholars as well as business world practitioners. However, there is a lack of consensus about what exactly comprises discrimination. The complexity of this concept is illustrated by Boulding (1976 in Lam, 2012):

"Discrimination is a phenomenon which is so pervasive in all human societies that there is no doubt at all that it exists. It is not, however, a unitary phenomenon but a complex of a number of related forms of human behaviour, and this makes it not only hard to define but frequently difficult to comprehend fully."

Discrimination is hard to define because considerable forms of behaviour come under its umbrella, including both conscious and unconscious behaviour. The former is usually referred to as explicit discrimination while the latter is defined as implicit discrimination (Bertrand et al., 2005).

➢ *Explicit discrimination*

Discrimination against women in the workplace is manifested through the wage gap between different gender groups and the exclusion of women in some occupations or industries (Lam, 2012). The majority of scholars claim that this discrimination was expressed explicitly before the 1960s. According to US statistics, women with full-time jobs earned 59 cents on average for one dollar earned by men in 1963. This gap narrowed dramatically in 2018 with women earning 81 cents for one dollar earned by men (NCPE, 2018). Similarly, occupational dissimilarity between men and women was extremely high in 1960 with a score of 0.69 in the US. This index of occupational dissimilarity is a measure of the extent to which males and females hold different occupations. If males and females had the same occupations, the index would be 0; if men worked in all-men occupations, and women exclusively worked in all-women occupations, the index would be 0. In 1995, this index decreased to 0.54 and continues to decline since then Cohn (2019)

Due to gender equality issues such as opportunities for girls to access quality education at all levels (United Nations, 2012) and women to access decent work and equal pay (ILO, 2012), changes in the labor market and family consumption requirements, changes to women's exclusion from the workplace have been urged since the 1960s (Scott et al., 2010). The ILO's Fundamental Convention no. 100 was set up in 1958 in

an attempt to deal with workplace discrimination (Klimek, 2014). In the same year, the ILO adopted the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention no. 111 1958 in response to emerging challenges of discrimination, which aims to reinforce equal treatment, especially in employment. In 2000 in New York, 150 heads of state and government at the UN Millennium Summit declared that their countries were committed to "promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger, and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable" (ILO, 2018). Influenced by international legislation and the global women's movement, China presented dedication to the improvement of women's rights. The first equal rights legislation was Article 91 of the 1954 Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Chinese women were given the "equal rights with men in all areas of political, economical, cultural, social, and domestic life." (Burnett, 2010). In the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing (Beijing Conference), China declared its determination of addressing the employment problems related to gender. The Employment Promotion Law of the PRC and the Labor Law of the PRC are the two fundamental laws that dealing with equal employment issues (China Daily, 2014). These laws seem to have led to the disappearance of gender discrimination in the workplace. For instance, it is hard to find job advertisements that forbid applications for women. Nor can employers publicly express their preference for male applicants over female. However, there is compelling evidence that the explicit discrimination of women has been deliberately hidden in subtle and powerful ways that are difficult to overcome (Kumra et al., 2014).

➢ *Implicit discrimination*

Besides the explicit discrimination, some conditions, such as time pressure and ambiguity under which many seemingly controllable behaviours are likely to lead to implicit attitudes, may cause the unconscious discrimination (Bertrand et al., 2005). Research on the Implicit Association Test conducted by Reuben and his colleagues (2014) shows both employers and participants discriminate against women

unconsciously because the search for a 'good' job applicant always involves time limitations and considerable ambiguity. In other words, identifying a simple formula to be followed to determine which candidates are the best fit is often difficult in practice (Bertrand et al., 2005).

2.1.2 Sociological Pressures

Female employees' career development is also constrained by sociological barriers, including care of children and social gender roles, given that women's prime childbearing years coincide with the hard work of career building (Kalysh et al., 2016), According to the OECD (2019), the average age at which women give birth is 30 or above in most member countries. In many countries, women choose to delay having their first child. Women's prime childbearing years are from 25 to 35. Only in Mexico is the average age 28 or less, while in several countries, such as Japan, Korea, Spain and Switzerland, it is 32 or above. In China, the average age of mothers having a first child is 28, a 2-year increase since 2000 (Burkitt, 2015). On the other hand, the average age of a first-time manager is 30 in many countries (Zenger, 2012). This correlation interrupts many women's careers path because of women's dual responsibilities. Numerous scholars assert that childbirth continues to have a powerful impact on women's career trajectories and development (Taniguchi and Rosenfeld 2002). In the US, approximately 50 percent of women who have an annual income of above $100,000 or who are top executives who do not have children (Dye 2005). By contrast, those women in leadership positions often attribute their success to the balance they can keep between family and work (Kumra et al., 2014). In other words, family obligations can be taken by their husbands or other members of the family.

➢ *Childcare*

Motherhood does hinder a women's career development, especially when children are at an early age (McIntosh et al., 2012). For example, female employees in Google were twice as likely to quit as their male counterparts before the implementation of a new

organisational maternity and paternity plan, which entitles new mothers to take five months off and new parents seven weeks off. As a result, new mothers are no more likely to leave than average employees (Bohnet, 2016). However, the effectiveness of this kind of policy is not always promising. According to Tienari et al. (2003), the extension of parental leave in Finland and Sweden fails the purpose of ensuring a women's continuous participation in a full-time job in the labour market, mainly because labor markets persist in being gender-segregated. Normally, the husband takes a more important job and earns a higher salary than his wife. In addition, with the adoption of flexible working programmes for women with young children in many OECD member countries, they have been found to be more exhausted and their performance is less satisfactory than than their male counterparts. (Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2011)
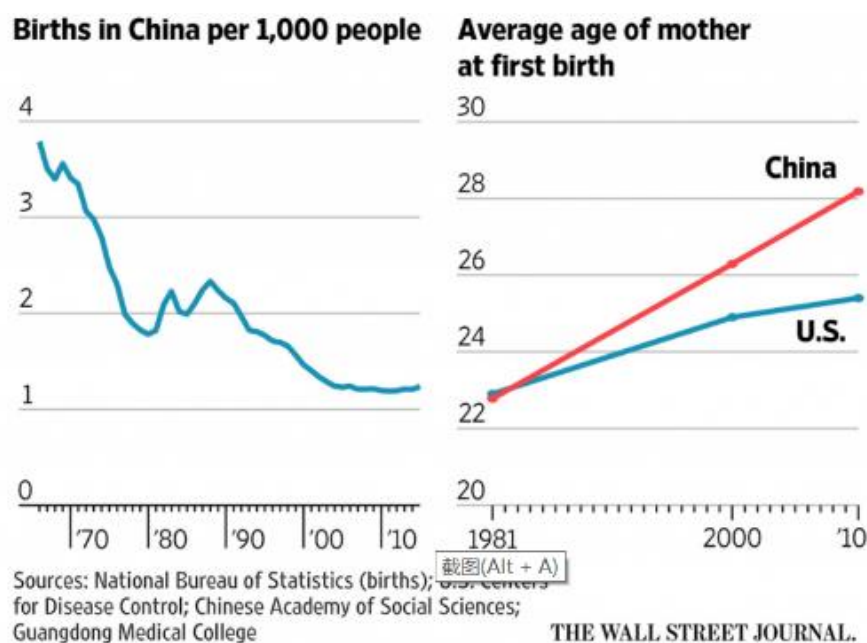
Figure 1 Average age of mother at first birth

➢ *Gender roles*

Women's professional work, to a great extent, is marked by conflicting familial demands (Cheung and Halpern 2010). According to Eagly (2013), social role theory is where the male is the major bread-winner while the female is the key caregiver in a family. In addition, Lewis & Humbert (2010) propose that because caring responsibilities are disproportionately distributed by gender, they correlate negatively with women's career success (Mayrhofer et al., 2008).

In an attempt to deal with this barrier for women employees, many family-friendly policies have been introduced in western countries, such as work-life balance (WLB) arrangements. The OECD (2018) reports that these policies contribute to the increase in the proportion of women in full-time employment in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Nevertheless, other scholars, such as Kalysh et al. (2016), who state that work-life balance policies can neither have an instant effect (he found the positive effect occurred eight years later), nor be generated in all organisational contexts. Also, the context plays a significant role in the relationship between work-life practices and women's representation in managerial positions because the positive influence of work-life practices was only achieved in organisations where women account for 43 percent or more of the total workforce.

In summary, sociological pressures exert negative impacts on the advancement of female leadership. According to previous research, it can be assumed that interventions aimed at dealing with work-family conflicts have a positive influence only in countries where social welfare is well-established and distributed, such as the Nordic countries. In other countries or organizations with a small proportion of women employees, interventions may encounter difficulties in taking immediate effect.

2.1.3 Economic Issues

Economic issues are one of the most significant factors that impede the development of women's career continuity and outcomes. The first driving force behind less favorable economic conditions for women is attributed to the first or second interruption to their

careers caused by childbirth. This is because, as mentioned above, some women may not retain their careers after having children. Women in that position have little chance to gain independent financial resources; even those who return to work may be denied opportunities to resume a challenging and promising career path (Ohlott et al., 1994), since it is assumed that women may demonstrate high commitment to their family responsibilities during child-raising years but low commitment to their professional development (Roth 2007, Hoobler et al, 2009).

The second driver has a close relationship with the first one. Some researchers argue that women gain plenty of experience caring for and communicating with others during child-rearing, and are therefore expected to be good at intimacy and nurturance, affiliation and attachment, communication and cooperation (Grant, 1988). These assumptions negatively affect women's upwards movement along their career path, since the skills gained from their unpaid work experience lead to less strategic professional work, making it difficult for them to access top executive positions.

➢ *Experience of unpaid work*

Since childcare is primarily ascribed to women, the number of women engaged in unpaid work is double that of men in most developed countries, and much more in developing countries (OECD, 2018). Women's experience, such as caring for and communicating with others, being flexible, and having intuition and empathy, is very noticeable (Helgesen, 1995), which leads to the prediction that communal traits are normally attributed to women (Cann and Siegfried, 1990).

➢ *Women's skills*

From their experience of child rearing, women are supposed to have skills that can contribute to leadership in some special ways. Helgesen (1995) proposes that women have the ability to empathise and create a more productive working environment. Similarly, Rosener (1990) claims they can exert power in a more constructive way and encourage creativity compared with their male colleagues. Moreover, Lipman-Blumen

(1992) states that women have the skill to bring people together to share their responsibilities and goals.

➢ *Marginalized roles in the workplace*

Those skills gained from childcare, together with the tendency for women to choose supportive roles, raise the possibility of being assigned to supportive but less strategically-linked work such as human resources (HR) directors, heads of administration and financial managers. According to an ILO report (2018), 89 percent of female leaders hold support positions rather than leadership positions. Tienari et al. (2013) also conclude in their research that Swedish women often occupy dead-end positions. This might result from the assumption that women demonstrate less commitment to their professional work while raising children.

Consequently, lack of accumulation of valuable experience is much more likely to impede women from climbing up the managerial ladder and disadvantage them in applying for strategic senior positions. This triggers the low proportion of women in top-level positions and exaggerates the wage gap between men and women (Kumra et al., 2014).

2.1.4 Contextual Differences

Unfortunately, this rich women's leadership literature has not translated into all contemporary social backgrounds, especially in the Chinese context. Because of the significant role context plays in female leadership progression, the following section will highlight the differences between China and the well-examined western context.

➢ *Key differences between China and western countries*

Firstly, numerous scholars consider that prejudice against women is derived from historical conditions (Scott & Brown, 2006). In this regard, traditional Chinese culture that has been dominated by Confucianism for more than two millennia emphasizes that

females are inferior to males and they ought to take on domestic responsibilities while males should work outside the home (Liu, 2007). The former stresses women's obedience and submission to males in society while the latter manifests explicitly stereotypical gender roles. These beliefs form the basis of Chinese women's self-identity, at the same time as they restrict them to be satisfied with their social roles as attentive wives and caring mothers (Cooke, 2003; Wang, 2002). Also, the Confucian patriarchal hegemony has proved highly resilient for thousands of years of collective experience in China (Leung, 2003), it may take much longer to eliminate traditional beliefs that disadvantage women.

At the same time, social-political issues can be considered another major difference between western countries and China because women's career trajectories are closely associated with political requirements. In Mao's era, the class struggle aimed to produce 'classless' socialism and encouraged women to act like men to take part in the Cultural Revolution and the socialist construction, but assigned the low-pay job to women, such as working in textile factories (Burnett, 2010). In the 1980s (the era of reform and liberalization), the Chinese government launched several programs to promote women leaders. However, most of them were subordinate to male leaders, therefore, easily dismissed as token (Wang, 2002). Moreover, the political declaration of China's liberation referred to creating fundamentally new and more democratic socialism within a male hegemony, and the campaign for gender equality is subordinated to other social or political issues in the PRC (Tsang et al., 2011). Therefore, it may imply that there has been a push for the whole of gender politics in China to revert to more traditional sex-role differences and power imbalances (Leung, 2003).

The current talent market in China is presented as being dynamic and sophisticated. China's reform and opening-up policies in the late 1970s brought about dramatic economic growth. Chinese GDP was 6.6 in 2018 and remains the fastest growing in the world (World Bank, 2018). This leads to high demand for talent in both multi-national corporations (MNCs) and domestic companies On the other hand, a gap between the

demand and supply of talents seems to appear in the Chinese labor market. This is triggered by two drivers. The first is demographic changes in recent years. According to China's National Bureau of Statistics (2015), the number of workers aged 16 to 59 decreased by approximately 5 million from 2014 to 2015, which was the biggest decline in recent decades. Secondly, the increasing number of educated professionals who choose to migrate causes further constraints on the supply side. For instance, more than 76,000 Chinese were awarded permanent residency status in the United States in 2014 (Kerwin et al., 2018). Therefore, the war for talents may provide more opportunities for women in China.

Taiwan, as a distinctive area, inherits the same Confucian cultural heritage as Mainland China. However, it is a democratic regime, whereas China remains an authoritarian socialist polity (Yang, 2016). In addition, Taiwan underwent rapid industrialization and became one of the four most prosperous Asian countries after the 1970s (Yang, 2016), when China initiated its opening-up policies and stepped into the market economy.

Obviously, the political and economic differences between Mainland China and Taiwan contribute to differences in gender issues. Taiwan ranked second-highest in gender equality in the world in 2012, based on the UN's Gender Inequality Index, much higher than other Asian countries, including   Mainland China (Liu, 2013). It is thus assumed that equality in leadership may be constructed differently in Taiwan.

2.2 Recruitment and Selection

Discrimination against women in the workplace, their double responsibilities in society and family, combined with economic disadvantages, contribute to the disproportionally low representation of female leaders in executive positions worldwide. In response to this problem, the majority of governments in the world have introduced a great number of laws, leading to an increase in female leaders in many countries. According to Grant Thornton International Business Report (2013), the proportion of women who held

senior management positions increased globally from 21 percent in 2011 to 24 percent in 2012. However, the pace of increase is far from satisfactory. Some scholars (Billing 2011; Ely et al. 2011) argue that to achieve a balance of women and men in managerial positions, a great number of factors at social, organizational and individual levels should be taken into consideration. Other scholars (Kumra et al., 2014) further state that women are less likely to be selected even when they are devoted to pursuing managerial positions. Therefore, this section will first illustrate traditional methods of recruitment and selection.

2.2.1 Traditional Views towards Recruitment and Selection

➢ *Purposes and process*

Due to globalization, high incidence of talent movement and an aging society, the effectiveness of recruitment and selection has become more vital than ever before (Roberts, 2005). Organizations aim to add value or productivity or to make changes through the acquisition of new human capital (Searle 2003). Additionally, they aim to maximize the likelihood of good performance, and minimize turnover and disciplinary issues by placing the right candidates into the right positions (Wilton, 2016).

While recruitment refers to initial activities to seek and attract a pool of suitable and potential applicants for a specified position in an organization (Ployhart, 2006; Wilton, 2016), selection is a process of choosing the best suitable applicants for a particular position (Gusdorf, 2008). Therefore, the main activities of recruitment and selection can be summarized as attraction and identification. R&S consists of four main phases (Figure 2). The first phase is job analysis from the work perspective, or competency analysis from the worker perspective. This results in a job description and person specification. The second phase is to analyze the labor market and decide the best way to attract potential candidates. This is followed by the assessment of applications through CVs at the beginning and interviews at the end. Finally, selection decisions are made, based on the assessment results (Searle 2003; Ployhart, 2006; Gusdorf, 2008;

Wilton, 2016).

Despite an initial attempt to be rational and objective, the context of the assessment may impact on the outcomes. Searle (2003) explains that both social and political values can influence the legitimization and confirmation of bias in R&S, and both organizations and applicants seemingly follow such processes. Similarly, Dipboye (1992) argues that political forces can shape the interview process.

➤ *Job analysis*

R&S begins with job analysis, which consists of six major factors (Figure 3). Normally, job analysis can be divided into two categories: work-oriented analysis, which refers to the essential activities involved in a job to formulate a detailed and concrete description for the job; and worker-oriented analysis, which focuses on attributes that worker need to possess (Searle, 2003). Sometimes the characteristics required for individuals are called competencies (Salgasdo, 2017), which include knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics. Scott and Douglas (2010, p.198) note that:

“Competencies are the measurable, organizationally relevant, and behaviourally based capabilities of people.”

The first outcome of job analysis is the formal job description (JD), which includes the job title, responsibilities, and duties, performance standards, the department it relates to, and relationships with other staff. It can be used as a guide in the design of job advertisements to send the right signals to attract applicants (Wilton, 2016). The second outcome is the person specification, which includes essential requirements that will guarantee the right candidates apply for the position, and desirable attributes that have a positive influence on individual performance (Wilton, 2016). Both outcomes can be used as criteria for decision- making (Cook, 2016; Wilton, 2016).

➤ *Recruitment*
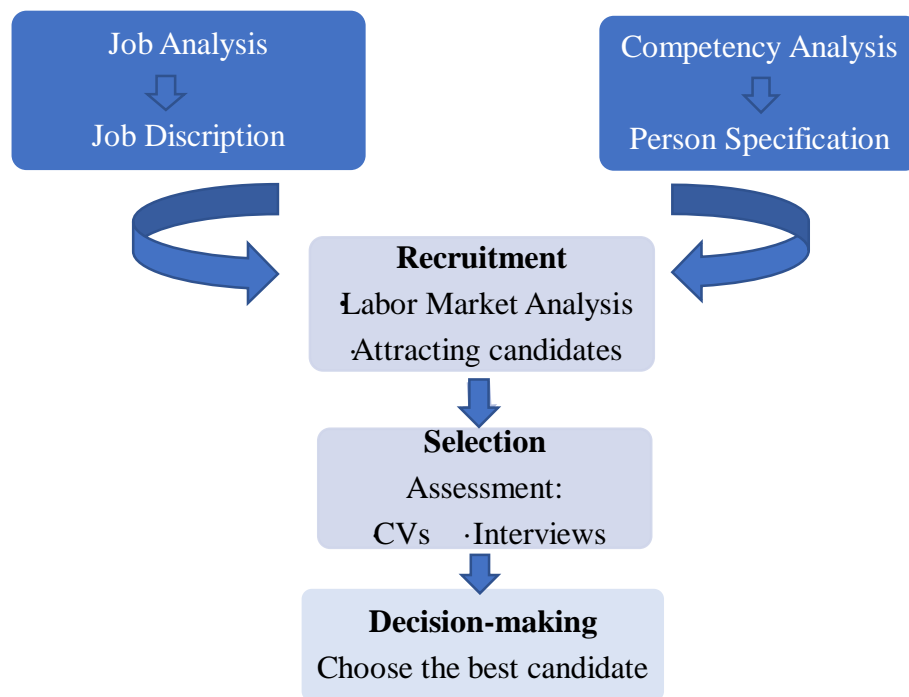
Figure 2: Recruitment and Selection Process

(Based on Searle 2003; Ployhart, 2006; Gusdorf, 2008; Wilton, 2016)

Once the job analysis and formulation of the profile of appropriately-qualified candidates has been completed, the recruitment process begins. As illustrated in Figure 2, one of the key activities in this phase is to identify the most appropriate channel torecruit potential candidates (Ployhart, 2006; Wilton, 2016). The frequently used channels for recruitment include: advertisement, e-recruitment, job center, and recruitment fairs. The other major activity in this phase is the attraction of potential candidates. Cook (2016) notes that the more carefully the advertisement is organized, the more likely the suitable talents apply. Breaugh & Starke (2000) further state that JD should be understandable and viewed as credible by those who the organization target.

➢ *Selection*
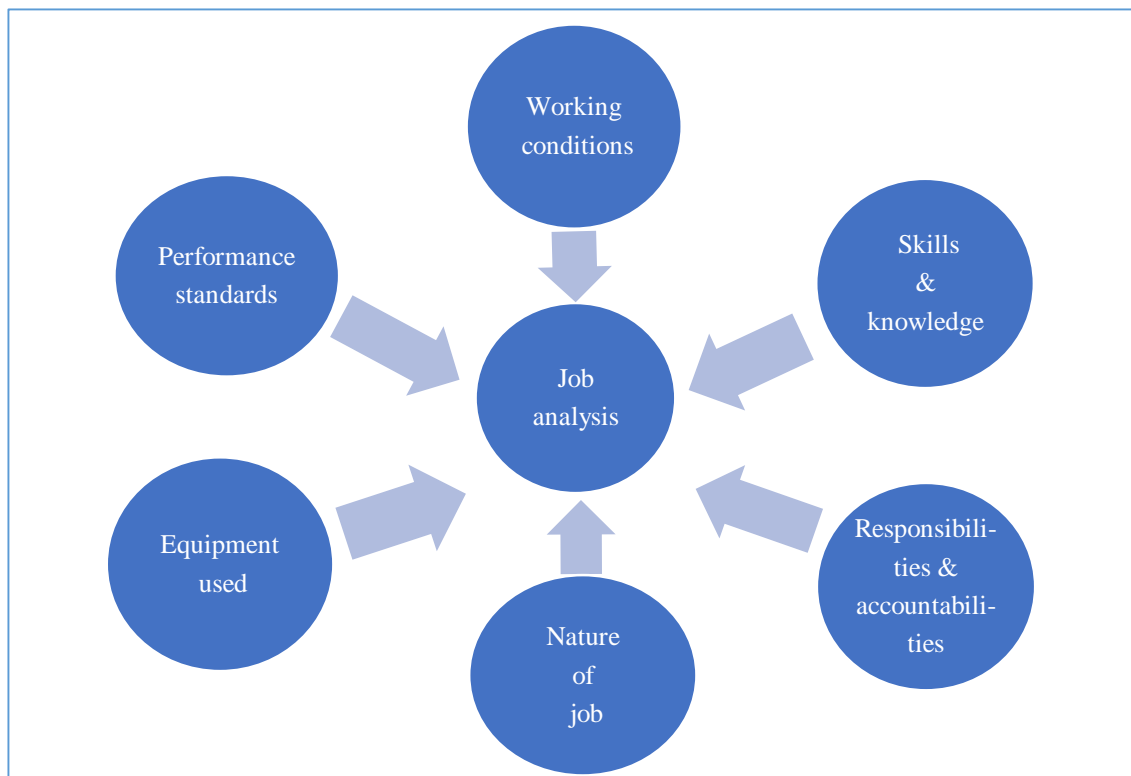
Figure 3: Factors involved in job analysis

(Adapted from Wilton, 2016)

Salgado (2017) points out that personnel selection is a predictive process, consisting of two parts: first, criteria that referring to employees' behaviour and the outcomes that organizations desire to gain; second, the predictor that referring to the assessment procedure. The essential criteria include individual job criteria to assess the person-job (PJ) fit; functional/departmental criteria to assess the candidate fit with established group norms; and, organizational criteria to assess the person-organization (PO) fit (Boon & Biron, 2016). This congruence between the applicants' competency with the job requirements and individual values with organizational values can to some extent, secure the retention of employees on the one hand, but may cause the homogenization of employees working at the organizations on the other hand (Salgado, 2017).

Additionally, from the employees' perspective, the extent to which their needs are satisfied by his or her job is also considered as an important component of this matching

(Boon & Biron, 2016). In terms of the assessment procedure, some assessment procedures are efficient in the prediction of a certain behavior (e.g. task performance) but they may be a poor predictor of other behavior (e.g. contextual performance) (Salgado, 2017). Also, similar measures may result in various operational validity. For examples, interviews. The behavioral structured interviews have a much higher operational validity score than that of unstructured interviews (Salgado, 2017).

Despite the abundance of methods to assess the suitability of candidates, practitioners overwhelmingly continue to use interviews (Kinnunen & Parviainen, 2016). The most frequent debate is the extent to which interview results can be stripped of bias through the use of objective assessments (Searle, 2003). Therefore, examination of the final decision-making is essential in order to ensure the accomplishment of R&S objectives.

➢ *Decision-making*

The three rules for decision-making are: clear criteria; criteria that equally apply to all candidates; and trained interviewers (Wood and Payne, 2014). However, selection is not a perfect science that follows objective criteria. It is affected by a number of elements. First, poorly-defined judgment criteria are more likely to trigger expectations which can affect recruiters' evaluation. Second, evaluators are less reliable in rating communication and interpersonal competence compared with work quality (Ones et al., 2004). Third, gender plays a significant role in recruiters' evaluations (Roberts, 2005). On the other hand, the decision-making of candidates must also be considered, such as the applicant's perceptions and reactions since the R&E process is mutual choices between employees and employers (Wilton, 2016).

2.3 Executive Search through Gender Lens

Executive searching includes four main phases: preparing, researching, searching, and interviewing. In the following section, the headhunting process will be illustrated by

referral to traditional R&S procedures. The influence this process has on the advancement of female leaders will also be analyzed (Meriläinen et al., 2013; Tienari, et, al., 2013).

2.3.1 Preparation phase

With the aim of defining both the job and desirable candidates, the preparation phase consists of two main activities: profiling and posting.

➢ *Profiling*

As with job analysis, profiling features in the pre-recruitment activity of configuring the initial job specifications (Doldor et al., 2012). It has two purposes. First, headhunters ascertain the prerequisites for appropriate candidates and skills of the particular job by discussing them with clients (Tienari et al., 2013). Second, headhunters can learn about the organizational environment where candidates will need to fit in by visiting the client's company (Coverdill and Finlay, 1998). Profiling is considered as a crucial practice in an executive search since it involves discussion about the definition of baseline criteria which may significantly influence the subsequent actions taken in the whole procedure (Doldor et al., 2012).

As with job analysis, the outcomes of profiling include the job description and person specification. These can be used to articulate ideal leaders and define essential skills and qualities, against which all applicants are assessed (Manfredi et al., 2019). Unlike job analysis, which is conducted within the organization, profiling is jointly formulated by both clients and headhunters. The former express what they expect and value; the latter contribute their knowledge about the relevant candidates on offer in the labor market (Tienari et al., 2003).

➢ *Gender issues in profiling*

Compelling evidence suggests that profiling for leadership positions is the first place

where women are disadvantaged because competencies for leadership positions are often defined on the basis of successful male leaders. Some scholars propose that competencies defining acceptability and suitability criteria are matched with preferred male candidates in top management recruitment (Tienari et al., 2013; Doldor et al., 2012; Holgersson, 2013). This is an influential factor in the preference for a certain kind of man and the exclusion of women.

Some scholars stress the role that headhunters play during this stage in terms of increasing gender leadership equality. For example, in research conducted by Doldor et al. (2012), the headhunters put great effort into persuading their clients to reduce the focus on rigid criteria, especially related board experience, in order to include more women candidates. However, some scholars argue that headhunters are passive participants in this stage. According to Tienari et al. (2013), it is difficult for them to improve gender diversity in managerial ranks in the profiling stage as there is little possibility they can persuade their clients to change their key criteria settings such as work experience and age.

➢ *Posting vacancies*

Clients normally first post managerial vacancies to headhunters who advertise them on their company or recruitment website (Tienari et al., 2013). This is where recruitment begins in the traditional R&S procedure, since it aims to attract potential applicants by advertisement. However, there is a commonly held belief that individuals prefer personal contact rather than responding to an advertisement, especially those in senior positions (Manfredi et al., 2019). Instead of expecting to obtain suitable applications by e-recruitment (i.e. publicly advertising a senior position), headhunters post the vacancy to personal social networks, through which they can receive recommendations (Tallerico, 2000). The solid networks of elite people within specific industries is considered one of the main reasons that a growing number of organizations are turning to professional external resources, i.e. headhunters, for help to hire talent for managerial

Headhunting Process vs Traditional R&S Procedure

R&S Procedure	Headhunting Process	Aims	Key Activities
Job analysis	**Preparing**	❖ Defining jobs and ideal candidates	❖ Profiling
Recruitment			❖ Posting
Recruitment	**Researching**	❖ Locating potential applicants	❖ Utilizing sources
Selection	**Searching**	❖ Evaluating appropriateness & willingness	❖ Formulating longlists for interviews
	Interviewing	❖ Assessment	❖ Conducting primary interviews ❖ Conducting final interviews
Decision-making		❖ Securing the candidates	❖ Offering the job

Table 1:   Headhunting Phases

(Based on Meriläinen et al., 2013; Tienari et al., 2013)

positions (Tienari et al., 2013). Further discussion about headhunters' networks will be presented in the following researching section.

➢ *Gender issues in posting*

Leadership vacancies are presented to prospective applicants through JDs, but they may have difficulty attracting qualified women. First, JDs for leadership posts – either formulated by clients or as a result of discussion between headhunters and clients, normally have strict requirements for relevant work experience which reduce the possibility of women applying because they lack related managerial experience (Doldor et al., 2012; Tienari et al., 2013; Manfredi et al., 2019). Second, lack of information about the competency requirements discourages women from applying. As mentioned,

most women are considered to possess diverse competencies such as interpersonal skills and communal traits (e.g. the ability to encourage employees) rather than hard skills (Growe and Montgomery, 2000). The predominancy of hard rather than soft requirements in JDs might be that the latter is more difficult to conceptualize and evaluate than the former. (Gibb, 2013). Finally, differences in the wording of JDs have an impact on how applicants perceive the job. Rather than sending an overt signal of gender preference, the wording of job advertisements is heavily gendered. In other words, competitive, ambitious and assertive are closely linked with masculine traits, whereas supportive, interpersonal and compassionate are explicitly associated with feminine ones (Bohnet, 2016). Some researchers claim that the more women infer a profession to be male-dominated, the less appealing they find those jobs, since gendered wording sends a signal to the applicants about whether they are excluded rather than whether they are competent to do the job (Bohnet, 2016).

2.3.2 Research phase:

The research phase is the same as the recruitment phase in R&S procedure, focusing on analysis of the labor market. The core action that headhunters take is to locate relevant information about potential applicants by using their networks throughout the labor market. Compared with traditional R&S procedures, vacancies are first posted to headhunters, who then conduct analysis of the labor market instead of clients.

➢ *Utilizing sources*

After grasping the requirements of the vacancy, headhunters utilize their knowledge, professional or personal connections and company database to source suitable applicants and prioritize the order of resources through which they can locate desired leaders/candidates (Tienari et al., 2013; Manfredi et al., 2019).

Headhunters are considered to add the most value to the process for two reasons. Firstly, they can reach out to those who do not intend to apply for the job through their personal networks. Secondly, they are able to conduct a global search for top talent through the

wide geographical reach of international ESFs (Doldor et al., 2012; Fernandez-Mateo & Fernandez, 2016).

➢ *Gender in research phase*

The gender issue arising in the search phase is that women are normally denied entry to the networks of headhunters that is defined as the 'new boys club', and therefore, lose the opportunity to get involved in selection (Faulconbridge et al., 2009).

2.3.3 Search phase:

For the purpose of evaluating the suitability of candidates, the assessment is the exclusive activity. This is in line with selection in traditional R&S practice, which aims to choose the best candidate for the position through the assessment.

➢ *Formulating the longlist*

In this phase, the appropriateness of candidates is evaluated by CV screening, and their interest in the application is ascertained through phone calls made by headhunters to potential candidates. The purpose of this is to formulate the longlist for interviews with headhunters. Normally, the list may include 5-7 people and each of them may be interviewed one-on-one by search firms (Meriläinen et al., 2013; Tienari et al., 2013).

➢ *Gender issues in CV screening: relevant work experience*

Headhunters are more likely to select potential candidates according to experience instead of necessary competence for a leadership position when screening CVs. Both employers and headhunters intend to choose candidates who have working experience in a similar position instead of choosing those who have the necessary leadership skills (Tallerico, 2000). Essentially, headhunters' practice is based on the requirements of the clients, thus, it is hard for them to appreciate those without similar working experience, in most circumstances, female candidates. Although some clients claim that they do not have a gender preference, they put such criteria that several years working experience

in a similar managerial vacant position in a specific industry is essential, which eliminates dramatically the possibility for headhunters to introduce female leaders to the top position. At the same time, because headhunters are restricted to a certain searching duration, they are less likely to put additional effort to assess candidates who originally have no related leading experience (Tienari, et al., 2013). They are routinely inclined to choose those who have the highest possibility to be chosen by clients through their expertized judgment which is continually based on the working experience in the same position (Correll, 2004).

2.3.4 Interview phase

The interview phase has two parts: first, a preliminary interview between headhunters and candidates from the longlist, with the aim of forming a shortlist; second, the final interview between clients and the shortlist, which normally consists of 2 or 3 top candidates (Finlay & Coverdill, 2002).

Like the search phase, the main purpose of the interview phase is to make a judgment about the candidates. However, a smaller group of candidates is assessed in the interviewing phase, but the assessment is more holistic and detailed.

➢ *Preliminary interview*

In order to decide which candidates should be recommended to the client, headhunters carry out a more intense in-depth screening which examines more closely the competency and 'fit' of candidates (Tienari, 2013).

The predominant method to evaluate the suitability of candidates at this stage is the interview. Two drivers which explain its widespread utilization are: first, it provides face-to-face validity to offset the distance that recruitment through headhunters may create; second, in circumstances where candidates may lack the motivation to change their current job, interviews may be an excellent way to prompt a new job opportunity (Clark, 1992).

On the other hand, other methods, such as psychological testing, may be less popular from head-hunters' point of view because first, headhunters want to display their expertise in assessing people through face-to-face interviews; and second, they lack professional knowledge about how to conduct other measurements (Tienari, et, al., 2013).

➢ *Gender issue in the primary interviews*

The dependence on interviews may trigger negative effects for women leadership candidates. Headhunters assess candidates according to three key factors in an interview.

First is the candidates' appearance (Kinnunen & Parviainen, 2016). In the labor market, people take it for granted that women are more dedicated to dressing up for interviews than men (Dean, 2005). Occasionally, headhunters may pick female candidates for a shortlist on the assumption that their feminine appearance may attract the clients (Brower, 2013). A second important element that headhunters use to evaluate candidates is personality, since the personality fit between candidates and client organizations can determine whether a person is employed or not (Kinnunen & Parviainen, 2016). Headhunters can assess candidates' personalities in many ways, such as gestures. In western culture, a 'constant' and 'firm' handshake is linked closely with self-confidence, openness and mental health (Eggert, 2010). The last factor is social skills. Kinnunen & Parviainen (2016) claim that fluid social skills are associated closely with women: the ability to listen, encourage, support and interact with subordinates (Growe and Montgomery, 2000; Esser et al., 2018) are all female-oriented skills. In summary, it seems that female leaders may have an advantage in interviews because they have both a pleasing appearance and desired social skills.

In fact, the interviews hinder the advancement of female leaders. Although the set of criteria used to select candidates in interviews is the same for men and women (Eagly and Johnson, 1990), headhunters rely a lot on gut feeling to decide which candidate will be put into the final list (Meriläinen et al., 2013; Tienari et al., 2013). This feeling is

closely associated with the preference of masculine traits (Bozionelos, 2005). Consequently, female leaders are less likely to succeed in the executive search procedure due to the powerful influence of headhunters in the elite labor market (Faulconbridge et al., 2009).

➢ *Final interviews*

The final interviews are carried out by decision-makers in the client company with candidates from the shortlist. At this stage, headhunters hand over the power of making the decision to the CEO and/or members of the board of directors (Tienari et al., 2013). Headhunters have low influence on the final decision. Instead, clients decide who they believe to be a suitable leader. As with the preliminary interviews, the interview is the most crucial activity in this stage, and decisions may be made on the basis of subjective evaluation.

➢ *Gender issues in the final interviews with clients*

The possibility of women leaders being selected in the final interviews is further reduced since senior leaders rely on biased intuition to make the final decision about the most appropriate candidate. According to research carried out by Tallerico (2000), clients conclude that their intuition about whether candidates will be compatible with them is the most influential issue in their final decision-making. Additionally, Doldor et al. (2012) propose that corporate chairmen are inclined to prefer similar characteristics to their own. Moreover, Bagilhole and White (2008) argue that powerful individuals (mostly men) influence and define values in an organization by recruiting and promoting people they consider similar to themselves. Clients' intuition is derived from the similarity-attraction theory (Kanter, 1987). In this sense, decision-makers in clients' companies can easily exclude female leaders because the majority are male leaders who are likely to favor male over female candidates.

2.4 Conclusion:

It is identified from the literature that headhunting as a way to select female leaders, to a great extent, might be influenced by the general barriers that women face in the workplace, and the way in which recruitment and selection are carried out, especially, the involvement of subjectivity.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This research methodology will comprehensively discuss the research strategy and processes as well as rationales for choosing them. A high-quality, rigorous approach is sought to make sure the research findings are credible.

The researcher conducted an interpretivist in-depth study, focusing on how headhunters select (or not) women for managerial positions. It explores underlying factors that influence this process.

This qualitative approach, of collecting and analysing interview data, helped identify meanings and interpretations. This chapter finally discusses ethical issues and presents limitations of the research.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The research paradigm is the foundation for conducting credible research. This includes ontological, epistemological philosophies and methodologies (Lincoln &Denzin, 2003). Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 107) define a paradigm as "a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimate or first principles". Kuhn (1970), the first researcher to use paradigms in the context of a framework to understand an inquiry, argues that paradigms can be regarded as established rules and techniques. They are helpful in the identification and illumination of a problem, provide reasonable direction to answer how headhunting influences female leadership advancement, and offer results and justifications which are acceptable to the academic community for further reference.

Research paradigms can be divided into several kinds. Among the most frequently used are positivist and interpretivist paradigms in the research of social science (Schutt, 2018). From the positivist view, behaviour and cause and effect can be measured and individual activity can be predicted; on the other hand, from the interpretivist view,

humans formulate their reality of the world in different contexts by interacting with others (Carson et al., 2001) because of their different experiences and perceptions in various contexts (Khan, 2014). Sale et al (2002) further propose that interpretivism concentrates on process and meaning. Similarly, Shaw & Anderson (2018) state that the focus of interpretive research is on assessing and understanding individuals' perceptions of the world.

Given that both philosophical paradigms have strengths and weaknesses (Cavana, Delahaye, & Sekaran, 2001), it is vital to prioritize research objectives when choosing methods for inquiry (Cassell & Johnson, 2006; Cavana et al., 2001). The present research used the perspective of headhunters to identify how headhunting influences the upward mobility of female leaders in Chinese organizations. It analyzed headhunters' conception of women leaders, and how culture or other contextual issues affect the way in which they interpret and make meaning of these concepts. This intereetation is made though the interactions between the researcher and the participants.

3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology explores the form and nature of reality and what can be known about reality (Ponterotto, 2005). The researcher adheres to a relativist standpoint of ontological approach in this study, which assumes reality is regarded as subjective and depends on the way in which researchers and participants perceive it (Creswell et al., 2007). Therefore, numerous and equally valid realities exist (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003).

Bearing this in mind, the purpose of the research is to investigate the phenomenon of the scarcity of women leaders in executive positions from headhunters' point of view through the semi-structured interviews, and address the questions which will identify the nature and reality of executive searches.

3.1.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is the way in which knowledge is known or acquired. It explores the

relationship not only between the investigator and the objective of investigation (Cope, 2014), but also between the investigator and reality (Carson et al., 2001). Under the interpretive research setting, it is assumed that there are interactions and links between the researcher and the researched so that the researcher is involved with the construction of findings through interaction with the researched (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Ponterotto, 2005).

In keeping with the idea that the selection of epistemology for research relies on the nature and reality of specific research, the researcher decided to follow subjectivist epistemology which emphasizes that reality is discovered and created (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), since the objective of this research is to obtain a deeper understanding of the way in which headhunters select female leaders for executive positions and how this procedure influences the career path of women leaders.

3.2 Research Methodology

Methodology refers to the process and method used by the researcher to acquire knowledge about the world (Creswell et al., 2007). It can help the researcher in several ways: first, in addressing the research questions and achieving the research objectives; second, in obtaining data; third, in interpreting data. It significantly directs the research paradigm to positivism or interpretivism based on research objectives. Given the focus of the present study, which is to investigate the headhunting process through which female leaders are selected, the exploratory approach (qualitative methods) is suitable to carry out this research (Creswell et al., 2007).

3.2.1 Research Purpose

Exploratory research is concerned with the exploration of a phenomenon that has not been fully explored or completely interpreted in order to understand it better (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Moreover, Schutt (2018, p.13) says social exploratory research:

"…seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to learn, 'What is going on here?' And to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations."

As aforementioned, this research aims to explore the procedure for headhunting women leaders in China and identify the underlying elements in this procedure that have an impact on the phenomenon of underrepresentation of women leaders in executive positions in Chinese organizations. This field has seldom been studied, because, firstly, the headhunting business was only established in 1992 in China, two decades later than in western countries (iRearch, 2016); secondly, confidentiality issues are more sensitive due to the industry's personal nature (Finlay & Coverdill 2002; Garrison 2005); thirdly, headhunting studies are dominated by the Anglo-American context and few have been conducted in developing countries such as China. Within the research that focuses on the Chinese labor market, few studies are concerned with female leaders. Therefore, there is a strong case to be made that female leaders' career development through headhunting should be further explored in the Chinese context.

3.2.2 Research Approach:

Given the exploratory nature of the current research, the qualitative research method has been adopted. Originating from the disciplines of education and social sciences, qualitative research focuses on the investigation of complex human behaviour (Barbour & Barbour, 2003). It not only explains daily life experiences but also gives them meaning (Burns and Grove, 2009).

The decision to choose a qualitative research approach is in line with the research paradigm and the exploratory nature of this research. It supports the relativist interpretivism paradigm by capturing multiple and equally valid realities, and most importantly, it provides the chance for hidden meanings to be discovered in the interaction between researchers and participants. This rich interaction advocated by

interpretive research is achieved by conducting semi-structured interviews. Moreover, qualitative research often underpins exploratory inquiry and emphasizes obtaining new insights into current situations and issues (Anderson, 2014). Strauss and Corbin (1998) further explain that the use of qualitative research can help to investigate less well-known and less explored potential antecedents and factors. Qualitative research stresses the observations and interpretations of people's perceptions of different events (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Neuman, 2007).

Through implementation of a qualitative study, questions like 'Why' and 'How' can be explored and the phenomenon can be explored. Research questions such as why or why not headhunters select women leaders for senior managerial positions, and how the procedure of headhunting affects the advancement of female leaders in Chinese organizations, should be investigated from perspectives such as the underlying perception of headhunters and employers towards women candidates, the social status of women in the Chinese context and the way in which women leaders promote themselves. To explore those aspects, in-depth interviews with headhunters are preferred for their effectiveness in providing extensive data from multiple angles.

3.2.3 Research Strategy: Interviews

The adoption of interviews has occupied an overwhelming proportion of qualitative research by both practical and academic researchers (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). As claimed by Cavana et al., (2001) the interview can yield rich and complex information from an individual.

The selection of interviews as a data collection method in the current research derived from two aspects: first, to identify the key reasons for the disproportionately low number of women in leadership positions in Chinese organizations from the perspective of headhunters; second, to explore how female leaders are selected through headhunters, and the headhunters' underlying perceptions. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015, p 83), "the aim is to study people's experiences as seen from their points of view,

or the social construction of knowledge concerning the chosen topic." As the questions put forward in this research relate to both information and perceptions, it can be argued that the interview is the most efficient method to obtain both sets of data. Semi-structured interviews have been employed to answer the "what" and "how" questions in this research, because they are considered fairly conversational and informal (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Corbin & Morse (2003) also claim that semi-structured interviews increase the degree to which participants can affect the direction of the interview process. To conduct the interviews, the researcher approached the participants after office hours and endeavored to select a convenient location for them that also ensured privacy and confidentiality. Participants seemed relaxed and motivated to share their perceptions and experiences of the recruitment of women leaders.

3.3 Research Population and Samples

The research population in this study consists of headhunters in Mainland China and Taiwan who have carried out the recruitment and selection of female leaders.

The reason for selecting headhunters as a target population to investigate the scarcity of women leaders in executive positions is due to the fact that numerous researchers have investigated this problem from social, organizational and individual perspectives, but ignored the vital part that external professionals, especially headhunters, play in the advancement of women leaders' career paths.54 percent of all U.S. positions are filled by executive search firms, with a compensation level above 150 thousands per year (IACPR,2003 in Hamori, 2010). In China, executive industry realized $900 million in sales in 2016 (iRsearch,2016). With the huge volume of selection work executed by headhunters, it is therefore reasonable to state that headhunters have a significant influence on women's leadership development. However, the question of what kind of influence they exert on the process of female leaders' career advancement remains

unclear in the Chinese context. Some scholars advocate that executive search processes uphold female exclusion; in other words, they enhance the predominant position of males as desired leaders. Tsang (2011) also argues that executive consultants have made themselves the most active actors in the labor market to determine who may be selected for senior positions and who may not. Others, as aforementioned, argue that headhunters exert very little influence on women's leadership development because they have little control over the final decision about who is employed since that is made by the top leaders in clients' companies, (Meriläinen et al. 2013). To gain a better understanding of this question, it is useful to target headhunters as a research population and conduct in-depth interviews to learn about their perception of women leaders, the procedures by which they select women leaders and the underlying rationale for doing so. That is why the present study has chosen headhunters as its research target.

A sample is a portion of a population or universe (Noy, 2008). The researcher deduces information about the whole population by researching a limited number of people, which can be called sampling. Neuman (2011) argues that the selection of a sample is closely associated with the research questions since the former is directed by the latter while the latter in turn contribute to generating results for the whole population.

The sampling technique adopted by this research is 'snowball sampling' since it is a useful technique for the researcher to reach potential participants (Noy, 2008). Using the 'snowball sampling' technique, the researcher was put in touch with the participants in this research through both personal and professional networks. Since the work of headhunters is extremely confidential and sensitive, it would have been difficult to contact them without any recommendations. The researcher had previously worked as a headhunter and was part of professional networks with headhunters and HR professionals, which made it possible to get more potential participants from recommendations made through the professional networks. Only two interviewees were personally known to the researcher. This reduced the likelihood of bias and, in turn, increases the trustworthiness and credibility of this research. Of the twenty people

contacted, seven headhunters declined an interview either because they thought headhunters had little influence in the process or personal reasons. The total number of interviewees was thirteen, two male headhunters and eleven female headhunters. They were divided into two groups based on their working experience, namely junior and senior. Those who had worked as headhunters for less than four years were defined as junior consultants, while those with fore years' or more experience were defined as senior consultants. The inclusion of both senior and junior consultants helped capture comprehensive understanding of the role of headhunters in women's leadership advancement. Composition of the sample is presented in Table 2.

In addition, the research participants were geographically diverse and belonged to different types of companies. The majority of interviewees worked in Beijing since it is well-known as the center of politics, economy and culture. The others came from Xi'an, Dalian, Chongqing, Shenzhen, which are all prosperous areas in China, and Taiwan. According to iResearch reports (2016), the distribution of headhunting firms is centered in the first-tier cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, and further expanded to the second-tier cities, such as Chengdu and Hangzhou. Rather than deliberately select the locations of headhunters, the researcher chose them randomly. From the geographical distribution of the research population, it was found that headhunting firms are roughly distributed according to the city's degree of economic development. Considering the types of organizations, five headhunters were employed by big enterprises with more than five hundred employees and the other eight belonged to small-to-medium sized companies with ten to two hundreds employees. Most of them engaged in headhunting at all levels and specialized in different industries.

Although the criteria for the sample size are determined by the type of research, namely qualitative or quantitative, representativeness and relevance are more important considerations (Neuman, 2011). In order to achieve a high degree of representativeness, the researcher chose participants from different locations with diverse working experience. To achieve a high degree of relevance, criteria included that participants

Type of ESFs	Location	Revenue (Roughly US$)	Specialized Industry	Core Business	Size Number of Employees	Gender	Years of Experience	Title
Private	Beijing		Real Estate; IT	Headhunting: C--suite&Other level Business Consultancy	10 to 20	Male	10+	Owner
Private	ShenZhen		Manufacturing; IT	Headhunting: C--suite&Other levels Supply-chain Consultancy	30+	Male	10+	Manager
Private	Beijing		IT; Consumer-goods	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	10+	Female	10+	Leader
Private Networking	Beijing	100 Thousands	All industries	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	10 Thousand	Female	10+	Manager
Private Networking	Chengdu	100 Thousands	All industries	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	1 Thousand	Female	5+	Leader
Private Networking	Xi'an		Real Estate; Comsumer-goods	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels Career development Consultancy	50+	Female	7+	Leader
Private Networking	Chongqing		IT; Consumer-goods Real Estate	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	10 Thousand	Female	4+	Leader
Large International	Beijing		All Industries	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	1 Thousand	Female	8+	Leader
Private	Dalian		IT; Manufacturing	Headhunting: C--suite&Other levels HR Outsourcing	30+	Female	10+	Manager
Private	Beijing		IT; Real Estate	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	10+	Female	3+	None
Private	Beijing		IT; Consumer-goods	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	30+	Female	3+	None
Private	Taiwan		Manufacturing; Electricity	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	30+	Female	3+	None
Large International	Taiwan	75 Thousands	All Industries	Headhunting: C--suite&Other Levels	10 Thousands	Female	3+	None

Table 2: Composition of research sample

needed to have experience in selecting female leaders.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The researcher contacted the potential interviewees via email. All related documents, such as consent to audio/video recording of the interview (Appendix 1 & Appendix 2), an information sheet for participants about audio/video recording of the interview (Appendix 3) and interview questions (Appendix 4) were sent to the participants prior to interviews. Eight consents to recording the interview were returned by email and the other five were returned in person.

Five face-to-face interviews were conducted in Beijing and eight interviews were conducted via phone because the participants were in different locations than the researcher. All interviews were recorded with a recording pen and uploaded to the researcher's personal computer. Interviews were conducted from November to December 2019. The researcher transcribed all the interviews from Chinese to English and stored all the data in a password-protected computer. Each interview lasted from forty-five to ninety minutes. Before commencing interviews, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study or terminate the interview at any time, and anonymity was guaranteed during recording.

To identify the perception headhunters have about female leaders and to explore how the headhunting procedure may affect the advancement of female leaders in their career path, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This type of interview features an open framework and allows the researcher to prepare focused questions on the one hand, and on the other hand to encourage participants to express their opinions, views, perceptions and experiences in the relevant area (Polit & Beck, 2006). This enabled the researcher to obtain rich data to answer the research questions. After the interviews, the researcher sent thank-you messages to participants and the

draft thesis will be provided when required.

3.5 Data Analysis

Transparency helps secure rigor and credibility in qualitative research (Stenbacka, 2001). Table 4 illustrates the approach to data analysis. The data was aggregated to analyse the linkage between headhunting activities and the selection of women for leadership positions. The linkage was formulated by open coding, the identification of overlapping codes, and then the identification of overlapping themes. Each phase of the data analysis will be presented in Table 3.

3.6 Rigour of the Research

In contrast to quantitative research which is judged in terms of validity and reliability (Carter and Porter 2000), qualitative research requires a different approach when assessing its quality (Tesch 2013). The most widespread criteria employed to assess the rigor of qualitative research are credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Phase	Description
Phase 1: During data collection	The researcher transcribed the interviews on the day they were completed. The researcher also reflected on the core themes by comparing the similarities and differences between findings and identifying unexpected findings. For example, in contrast with western countries, there were no network restrictions to women leaders in China, instead, they could access any social network.

Phase 2: After data collection	After the collection of data, all the transcripts were translated from Chinese to English. Concepts were kept as close as possible to the interviewees' own language (Clark, et al., 2010).
Phase 3: First Coding	The English transcripts were initially sorted into an Excel document with all key issues following the sequence of headhunting procedures. Then, those issues were printed out and cut into individual small cards. All cards were aggregated according to their similarities and differences, which allowed the free mobility of each card. This is vital for qualitative data analysis which normally include overlapping information. After working through all the cards (by moving forward and backward each card to ensure high degree of consistency as well as membership to an appropriate code), they were then aggregated into 24 first-order codes (see Figure 4).(Maanen,1979).
Phase 4: Second Coding	Derived from conceptual relationships between first-order concepts, they were then further grouped into the second-order coding to depict 6 key themes, including (1.1) gendered profiling; (1.2) male-dominated leadership talent markets; (2.1) women's restricted suitability to leadership positions; (2.2) women' beliefs about self and leadership; (3.1) subjective decision-making; (3.2) Low influence & inefficient headhunters' support.
Phase 5: Third Coding	The last step in the data analysis focused on the development of higher-level themes. This consisted of three dimensions which fostered a deeper understanding of the research questions by grouping the six second-order themes in pairs: (1) gendered beliefs about candidates; (2) poor fit to leadership

vacancies (3) inefficient co-ordination and mediation between female leaders and clients

Table 3. Process of data analysis

The researcher in this study has endeavored to fulfil all four criteria. Credibility, which emphasizes the value and believability of the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Polit and Beck 2006), was achieved firstly by summarizing the key points of each question for interviewees during the interviews. Moreover, they were invited to review their transcripts in Chinese to ensure accuracy. The consent to audio/video recording of the interview (Appendix 1 & Appendix 2) stated that they had the right to request the interview transcript. In this way, the research participants were offered the option of ensuring that the researcher correctly recorded their opinions. Seven of the thirteen interviewees took up this offer, and one participant made a change to his suggestion about beneficial ways to improve the proportion of women in leadership positions from the legislative perspective. The remaining five participants agreed with the researcher's transcription of the content.

Confirmability stresses both the neutrality and accuracy of the data (Tobin and Begley 2004), and is closely associated with dependability, which refers to the stability of the data (Rolfe 2006), since the processes for establishing them are similar (Houghton et al., 2013). Due to the research paradigm employed, which values interaction with the interviewees and considers the researcher a research participant (Rodgers and Cowles 1993), the researcher acknowledged that this might lead to bias in the findings. This self-awareness can contribute to the credibility of the research (Creswell, 2013) on the one hand, and the confirmability and dependability of the study on the other. The researcher documented the whole research process by keeping a reflective diary, which not only provided the rationale for decisions made (Primeau 2003, Rolfe 2006), but also presented the theoretical perspective that affected data collection and research (Toffoli and Rudge 2006). This, as claimed by a number of researchers, may significantly increase reflexivity (Jootun et al 2009).

Finally, transferability, which refers to the possibility of applying the findings to a similar context, was achieved by providing an accurate description of the original context of the research (Houghton et al., 2013). The researcher not only presented the research methods in detail but also used direct quotations from the interviews to facilitate judgement about transferability of the research findings.

Table 3	Methods Used to Ensure Rigor
Criteria for vigor	**Methods Employed**
Credibility	Member checking
Dependability	Reflexivity
Confirmability	
Transformability	Thick Description

Table 4: Methods used to Enhance Rigour

(Adapted from Houghton et al., 2013)

3.7 Ethical Issues

Ethical approval of this research was granted by Victoria University of Wellington in 2019 with the reference No. 0000027997. Ethical issues are vital for both quantitative and qualitative research but are more vital in qualitative research since it is more likely to affect participants' lives (Punch, 1998). As declared by Neuman (2011), researchers have a professional obligation to be responsible for conducting ethical research even when participants have no concern or awareness about ethics. Therefore, the researcher should present both benefits as well as potential risks to participants, including protection of their privacy and confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to know about all aspects of the research study (Punch, 1998).

The researcher implemented ethical considerations throughout this research. Participants were informed that, besides those mentioned above, they could withdraw at any time. Before proceeding with an interview, participants signed consent

statements. In order to avoid any identification of individuals, the researcher declared that the participant merely needed to introduce themselves by their surname or English name, length of time they had worked as a headhunter, and the location and type of company. They were told that no identifiable information about candidates and organizations should be disclosed. If during the interview, participants accidentally mentioned identifiable information about the client companies, the researcher immediately reminded them to avoid providing such information. In the process of transcription of the audio records, all identifiable information has been replaced by pseudonyms or omitted altogether. Lastly, the snowball sampling technique through the researcher's professional and social networks avoided any organizations' involvement in data collection and meets the requirements of ethical considerations.

3.8 Limitations

The first limitation of this research is the choice of headhunters to interview. One weakness of using snowball sampling is the possibility of attracting research participants who are similar to the researcher (Noy, 2008). This seems to negatively influence research findings in terms of transferability. However, this research sample was able to include both large networking companies and small firms, which were either large international brand companies or small domestic firms. It is thus argued that the findings of this research are transferable to broader contexts.

The other limitation concerns the single group of interviewees. As mentioned above, the headhunting procedure involves three parties, namely clients, candidates and headhunters. It would be more robust to interview all the parties engaged in the research in order to ascertain the way in which headhunters interact with them. However, as a headhunter with more than 5-year working experience, the researcher has been able, to an extent, to assess the reliability of views expressed by the interviewees. It would also require a substantial increase in the number of interviews, which is beyond the scope

of the Master's thesis.

Chapter 4: Findings

Figure 4 presents the three interpretive orders of this methodological approach (O'Reilly et al., 2012). The first column shows the common and recurring first-order concepts. The second column depicts the six core themes by theoretically integrating the first-order concepts. The last column displays the three dimensions derived from the other two orders of analysis (Clark et al., 2010). It represents gendered beliefs about candidates in the talent market, the quality of leadership candidates on the supply side, and the way in which headhunters interact with both the demand and supply sides separately, which can explain the deep causes for the disproportionally low number of female leaders in the headhunting procedure. Figure 5 articulates these issues in a model that illustrates the three dimensions.

4.1 Gendered Beliefs about Candidates

Interviewees reported two reasons for gendered beliefs about candidates in the leadership labour market.

Second-order theme: 1.1 Gendered profiling. As noted before, profiling is the same as job analysis, which is conducted to formulate the JD as well as key criteria for decision-making (Cook, 2016; Wilton, 2016). Most participants agreed that JDs are objective descriptions of the job and present the hard and soft requirements, and cannot include any gender preference. However, all of them admitted that, while the JDs are an objective description of vacancies, clients have subjective preferences for leadership positions. One female general manager in a private firm stated:

> "All clients have a male preference for some positions which is conveyed in the first meeting with us. This preference cannot appear in the JD since it is discrimination against women which is forbidden by the Labour Law in China."

Client preference for male candidate	Gendered profiling	Gendered beliefs about candidates
Scarcity of women in management positions	Male-dominated leadership talent markets	

Exceeding age requirements	Restricted suitability to leadership positions	Poor fit to leadership vacancies
Few positions that fit with women leaders		
Career disturbed by delivery of baby		
Lack of energy to work intensively		

Lacking confidence	Women's beliefs about self & leadership
Lacking decisive courage	
No aspiration to higher positions	
Position-career plan fit	

Male-rational beliefs

Female-emotional beliefs

Person-organization fit

Appearance

Leadership style

Family-work distribution

Male-oriented ideal candidate

Chemistry with clients

Gut-feelings

Interview-dominated selection method

High-potential candidates

Subjective decision-making

Inefficient co-ordination and mediation between female leaders and clients

Limited monitoring ability

Less influential Headhunters

Different quality of headhunters

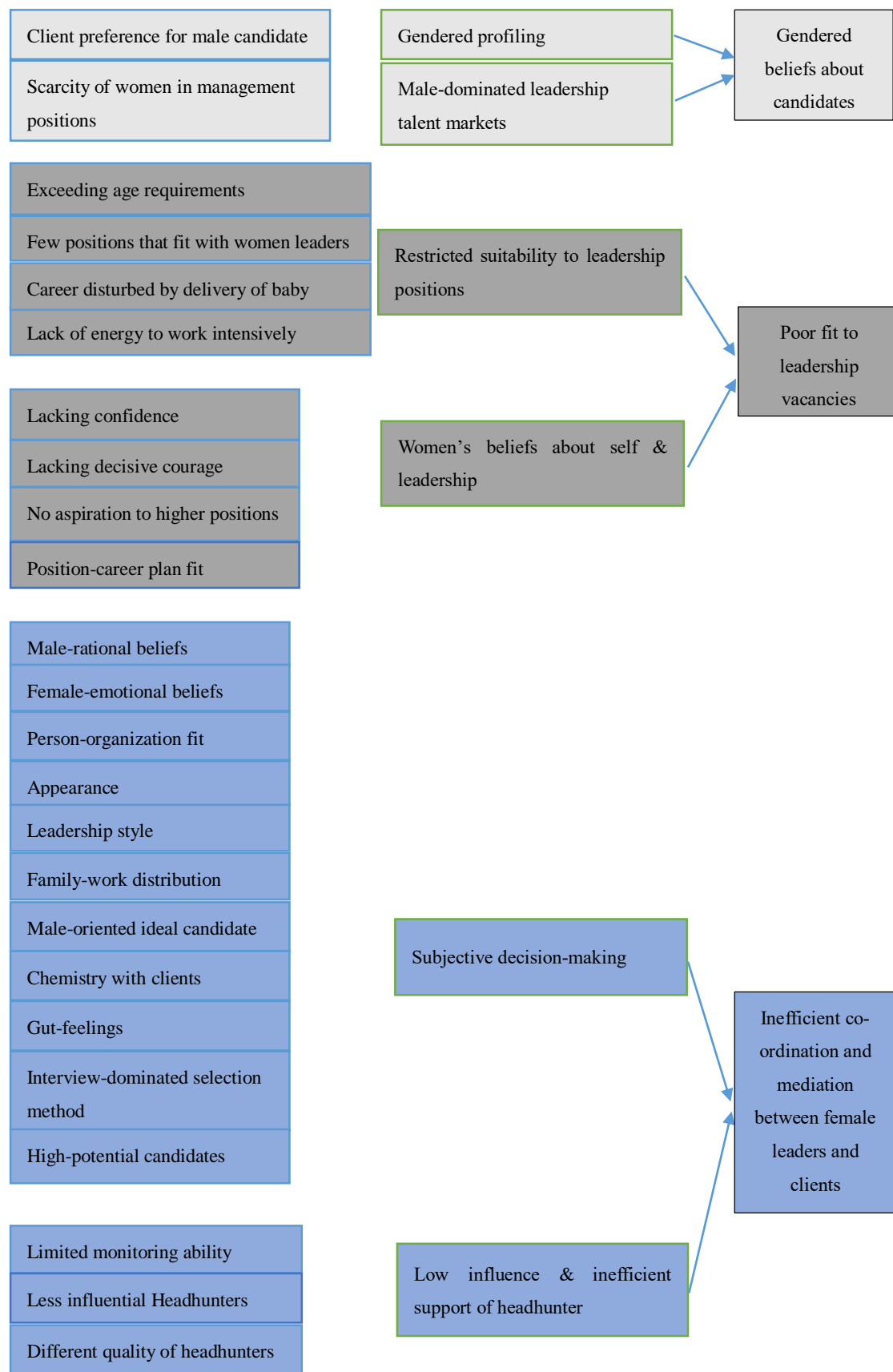Low influence & inefficient support of headhunter

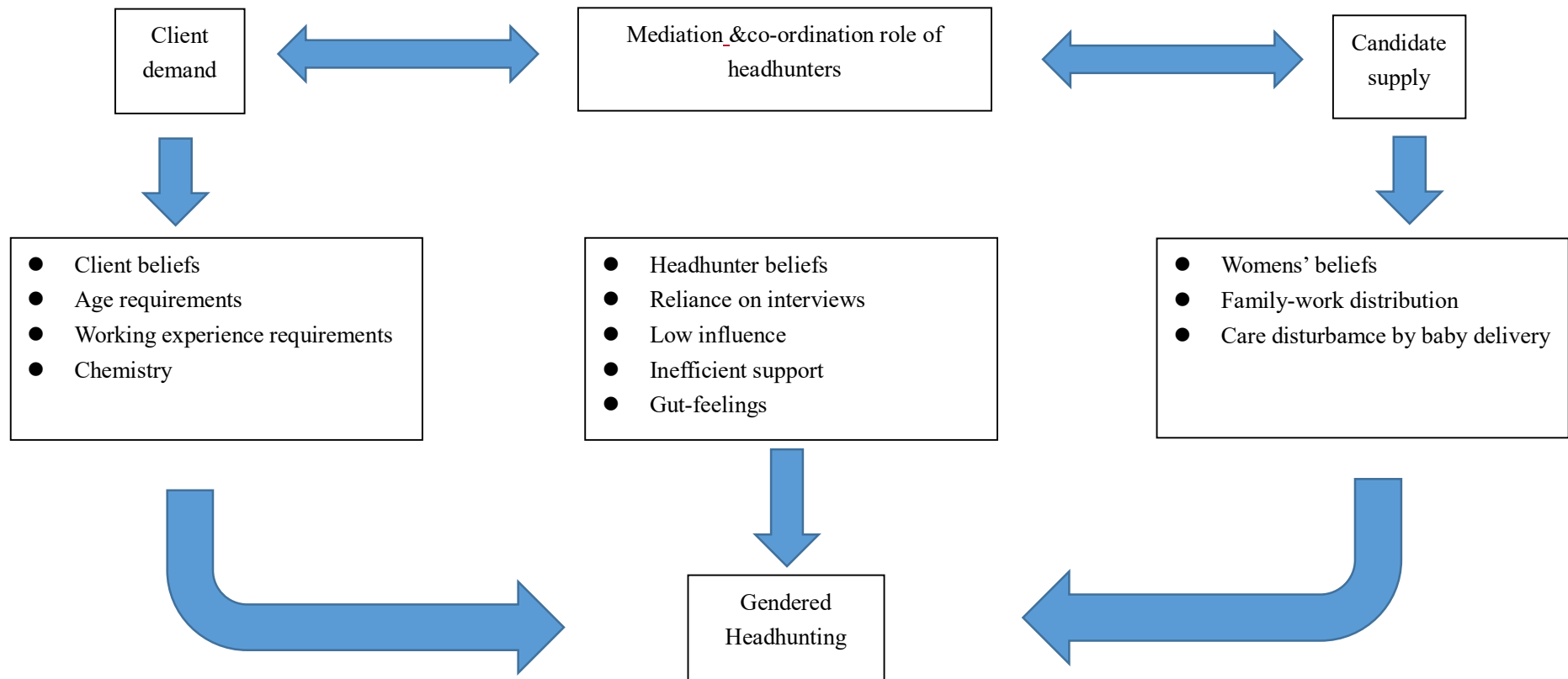Figure 4   Three interpretive orders emerging from the data

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Figure 5 Model of gendered headhunting in China

A female junior consultant in a private networking company pointed out:

"Compared with private companies, public sector organizations and international companies are likely to have less gender preference."

This is in line with findings in several similar studies conducted in western countries. For example, Tienari et al. (2013) and Doldar et al (2012) conclude that clients prefer men for managerial positions. This preference is a determining factor that may negatively affect the advancement of female leadership through headhunting (Holgersson and Tienari, 2015). On the other hand, the two Taiwanese participants disagreed, noting that clients considered whether candidates were able to take frequent business trips or work in another city rather than gender. They further pointed out that anti-discrimination laws strictly forbid gender and age discrimination and were well-implemented in Taiwan.

There are several drivers for favoring males in leadership positions. First, as previously illustrated, most clients in China have discriminatory attitudes towards women regarding leadership positions (Coverdill and Finlay, 1998). Clients normally believe that men are superior to women in both physical and mental terms: The following comments were all made by senior female consultants:

- "Men are always full of energy while women get tired easily when they are over 40 years old. This is the weakness of women especially for leadership positions which require consistent energy."

- "Men can sleep for 3-4 hours per day and remain vibrant. In contrast, women require relatively long hours of sleep in order to keep working."

- "Men think logically but women are too emotional. They pay a lot of attention to the details and care too much about others' opinion."

- "Women enter menopause when they advance to senior positions, so they may have difficulty controlling their emotions."

Secondly, as has been noted before, the sociological segmentation of work may prevent women from becoming effective leaders (Ogbogu, 2011). As the female manager of a headhunting firm commented:

> "Most women are used to put their family in the first place and likely to compromise their achievement in career to fulfil their family obligations."

Thirdly, many clients choose a particular gender for certain positions because this gender has a high proportion of qualified candidates to choose from. A male manager of a headhunting firm put it this way:

> "The reason clients prefer one gender instead of another is merely because they have a large number of competent leaders from this gender group to choose from. For example, it is easy to find an HR director among women while a CFO is more likely to be chosen from men."

This corresponds to research conducted by Tienari et al. (2013) that positions like CEOs and COOs are male-dominated, while positions in communications or human resources are female-dominated. The scarcity of women in strategic positions leads to an inadequate supply of female candidates. This shortage in the supply side was mentioned by ten out of thirteen interviewees, so the researcher aggregated this reason for clients' preferences in the next theme.

Second-order theme: 1.2 male-dominated leadership talents market. The absence of female leaders in the leadership talent market results in the low possibility of headhunters reaching them. As argued in much of the research, supply factors play an important role in the recruitment of female leaders in that the paucity of women in leadership positions partially reflects the limited number of qualified female leaders available to fill senior roles (Barsh et al. 2012, Parrotta and Smith 2013).

The participants identified three main channels through which headhunters locate qualified candidates. The first is the companies targeted by the search firms and the

hiring organizations in a consultant process（Werr & Styhre, 2002）. The second is their professional networks. Search professionals rely heavily on contacts and informal social networks when developing a list of candidates (Finlay and Coverdill, 2002). The third is their own company's database. As put forwarded by Faulconbridge et al. (2009), that they use the firm's database to identify prospective candidates or headhunters' contacts to obtain recommendations for suitable candidates. In this study, some headhunters employ the three approaches to locate candidates in a sequential order. Others like to use them simultaneously, and two interviewees (one from Taiwan) from large networking executive search companies said they rely exclusively on their company's database.

However, for senior management positions, there are seldom any qualified female leaders in the talent market. In case of the targeted companies. One male manager of a headhunting firm said:

> "I do not target only male candidates if my client does not mention that they prefer a male leader, but normally, what you find in the target companies is nearly ninty-nine percent of the leaders are male, except in functional positions such as Vice President of HR."

Regarding headhunters' networks, a female manager of a headhunting firm confessed:
> "I have many more male candidates in my network than female candidates, therefore I seldom connect with female leaders when searching for candidates."

Another senior female consultant noted a similar situation in their database:

> "I do not pay attention to gender if clients do not stress their preference for a certain gender. But I can only find one percent of female leadership candidates in our database."

Interviewees said reasons for this phenomenon were derived from sociological pressures. According to a male headhunting manager:

"Women are supposed to take care of the family and devote more time to family and children compared with males. Also, they are likely to tell themselves that spending extensive time establishing social networks instead of taking care of children and doing domestic work is the opposite of what they are supposed to do."

One female headhunting manager further explained that the childcaring hindered women career upward mobility since it deducted the time that women could take part in the social network:

"I think women spend too much time and pay too much attention to childcare. It is reasonable to say that you gain more when you pay more. So, if women spent more time on work, they would definitely gain more from work. For example, if they devoted more time to developing social networks, women would have more opportunities to advance their career, since it is an important way to get career information."

Similarly, another male headhunting manager stated that:

"It is time for Chinese men to realize that they should take more responsibility for childcare, although male is less capable in terms of domestic work. Relieving from the family work can give women more chance to develop their career either by increasing their competency or developing more professional networks."

Another reason given for the paucity of women who apply for leadership positions is that they are denied access to the "new boys' club" formulated by headhunters (Faulconbridge et al., 2009). This study found that, on the contrary, there was no subtle exclusion of female leaders from headhunters' professional networks in Mainland China and Taiwan. One senior male headhunter said:

"There is no such kind of social network that restricts the entry of females. As far as I know, females are very welcome in most networks, such as executive social groups and Executive Master of Business Administration groups. Male leaders

greatly appreciate competent female leaders."

First dimension: gendered beliefs about candidates. Compelling evidence has shown that the inappropriate definition of leadership candidates on the demand side, combined with the paucity of female leaders on the supply side, may be the first underlying defect in headhunting procedure. The problem on the demand side indicates that gendered selection is triggered in the initial stage of the procedure. The scarcity in the supply side, on the other hand, reduces the possibility that clients consider employing women as qualified leaders and that headhunters can identify them in the labor market.

4.2 Poor Fit for Leadership Vacancies

The interviewees put forward two recurring themes which are closely related to the poor fit of women to leadership vacancies: their limited suitability and their unwillingness to pursue leadership positions. As has been noted above, the selection decision is based on the match between the PJ and PO. This match depends on not only the clients but also the candidates, which is the both-sides, i.e. organizations and candidates, choice (Wilton, 2016). Therefore, it is important to examine the choice of women candidates in order to gain a holistic understanding of selection outcomes.

Second-order theme: (2.1) restricted suitability to leadership positions. The PJ fit and PO fit are closely associated with high performance and lower turnover of staff (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Headhunters in Coverdill & Finlay's research (1998) claimed that the criterion of fit is at the centre of employee selection. The combination of age and experience is regarded as one of the most important criterion of fit for top management positions (Bendl et al., 2013)

Regarding age, the problem for women leaders is that the vital time for women to develop their leadership skills conflicts with child-rearing (Kalysh et al., 2016) which means most of them miss the age limit for leadership positions. In addition, clients'

expected and preferred age is younger than it used to be (Tienari et al., 2013). Most importantly, employers are likely to rule out candidates of an 'inappropriate age', defined for the most part as 'too old' (Coverdill and Finlay, 1998).

One male headhunter company manager asserted that one of the criteria to assess the suitability of leadership candidates, the age preferred by clients, is getting younger. This was agreed by a female senior consultant:

> "With both men and women, I consider their age for leadership positions, especially in the speedy development industries, where the leaders are expected to be younger. For female leaders, it is unavoidable that their career will be disturbed by having children and that they will sacrifice their career advancement to care for children."

A female headhunting team leader confirmed this phenomenon:

> "It is hard for a women leader to change her job after the age of 40. But before this age, most women are occupied with child-bearing and child-rearing."

However, one junior consultant stated:

> "The influence of children on successful female leaders is limited since they only take very short maternity leave."

Another female headhunter manager made a similar comment:

> "Some female leaders can begin to work three or four weeks after the delivery of a baby and engage in business trips without the disturbance of a little baby. But this is only a small proportion out of the total female leaders' talent pool."

In the case of Taiwan, the two interviewees suggested there was a similar age expectation for leaders as in Mainland China. The IT industry also required leaders who were 5 years younger than in other industries. However, they admitted that both clients

and headhunters accepted less than a three-year absence of women from the workplace since Taiwanese women were entitled three years' family leave without pay to look after children. parental leave. One of them further noted that they would be concerned about a person's ability to readjust to the workplace if they had more than a 3-year break.

Reasons for the age limit for leaders can be attributed to two factors according to the participants: first, high workload due to the speed with which technology is developing; second, co-operation with the younger generation. One female headhunting team leader said:

"Despite the high workload for the majority of managerial positions, the workload in the internet and IT industries is overwhelmingly heavy because of the rapid development of technology. This requires not only extremely good physical condition to deal with those workloads, but also an excellent ability to learn in order to keep up with the rapid upgrading of technology."

Regarding co-operation with the younger generation, a junior female consultant commented that:

"In the IT industry, the younger generation accounts for 70 percent of all employees, so the age of leaders is extremely critical when aiming for effective co-operation between leaders and subordinates."

Another female consultant also claimed that:

"The Generation Y (people who were born between 1981 and 1996) occupies the high-tech industries, so these companies prefer younger leaders to achieve positive communication results in organizations."

Aside from age, work experience may deter women leaders from progressing their careers. Executive search consultants take a conservative approach to define those

candidates who have work experience in reputable, well-performing corporations as salient and 'elite' human capital (Khurana, 2002), since work experience has become the main indicator of candidates' quality (Shepherd, 2017). In this study, all headhunters used the criterion of work experience in the process of selection. One female senior consultant said:

> "I concentrate on different dimensions in the CV screening process, including education background (i.e. 985, 211 which refers to the top educational institutions in China) and work experience, which is better if it is in well-known giant companies."

In addition to the companies that candidates are currently working in or have previously worked in, the length of time that candidates work in similar positions is assessed as well. However, in China, as aforementioned, women account for a small proportion of leadership positions and most of them occupy the less-strategical positions (Liu, 2013). This requirement, thus, prevents women from being defined as 'qualified' candidates' by headhunters in the management talent pool.

Some headhunters comply strictly with this requirement. A female junior consultant said:

> "It is impossible for us to change any criterion for assessing the appropriateness of candidates; what we are supposed to do is to make a successful recommendation and gain our commissions."

One female headhunting team leader stated that:

> "There is no need for further consideration of those who have no similar leadership experience since it is merely a waste of time. We are exposed to big sales pressure and must estimate the rate of input and output all the time."

The most obvious factor that triggers headhunters' compliance with clients'

requirements might be the contingency fee which only can be received once the candidate is hired (Coverdill and Finlay, 1998). For this reason, most may exclude female candidates who fail to accumulate the working experience desired by clients. On the other hand, some headhunters may try to clarify the work experience requirement with the client under some circumstances. One female senior headhunter said:

> "I do not totally align with the requirement of work experience. Instead, I assess the labor market first. If qualified candidates are extremely scarce, I may suggest my client change this requirement, for example, reduce the eight-year requirement of experience in the same position to five years' experience. Sometimes, it works but sometimes it does not."

In line with the prevalence of specific assumptions about age as well as the traits of a person of a certain age, the ideal top management candidate is characterized as middle-aged with a long and successful track record (Holgersson & Tienari, 2015). Considering that women invariably take on the larger share of child-rearing, the pool of middle-aged female leadership candidates with the desired track record is inevitably limited (Grant-Vallone & Ensher 2011). Their path to top positions through the selection of headhunters, therefore, may be extremely constrained.

Second-order theme: (2.2) Women's beliefs about self & leadership   Despite other structural changes in society, gender segmentation in paid work is stubbornly resilient and persisting (Correll, 2004). Besides external factors, women's instinct about their career choice is another crucial inhibitor. In other words, only if women possess an intrinsic interest in aspiring to leadership roles, can they take full advantage of emerging opportunities (Correll, 2004). Therefore, in the next section, the internal drivers for women's leadership advancement will be examined.

First, women lack the confidence to pursue senior management positions compared with men. After analysing surveys conducted in the 1990s and in 2004 in the UK,

Coleman (2004) concluded that women were more likely than men to lack confidence.

Some of the interviewees also said that self-doubt negatively influences women's career advancement in the headhunting procedure. At the stage of interpreting the JD, a large number of women appear to give up the opportunity. In the words of one female senior consultant:

> "JDs are divided into two types: first, general JDs, which aim to store potential leadership talent; second, detailed JDs, focusing on current vacancies. When I post the first type of JD, women always say that they have little confidence to apply for the job due to the lack of information they can obtain from the JD. But it seldom happens with men since they are always full of confidence."

Similarly, another male headhunter pointed out the problem for women in the first stage of headhunting is that:

> "The JD is only a medium through which the candidate can be given general information about the job, so it depends on how the individual interprets it. Some of my female leadership candidates are likely to underestimate their competency and have no confidence to apply for senior leadership positions."

Two other interviewees emphasized the behaviour of women who lack confidence in the final stage. They said women hesitated to accept or reject the job. It seemed that they had a lot of things to consider but, essentially, they just lacked the confidence to take the new job or adjust to a new environment.

Female leaders' lack of confidence has created a number of negative perceptions of them among headhunters. First, headhunters believe women leaders may lose opportunities to move up the career ladder when they are less confident to apply for leadership positions. One female manager of a headhunting firm noted:

> "When women refuse the invitation from headhunters, it is deemed to be a lost

opportunity. They do not even make an in-depth search of the duties of leadership positions before rejecting the opportunity to have a try."

Second, the hesitation of women leader candidates may waste headhunters' efforts. Two female headhunters expressed the same opinion that they were reluctant to contact female leaders since, in most circumstances, it was hard to get them to make decisions and resulted in nothing in the end.

While most interviewees stated that women lacked confidence to take up the challenge of a new job, one male senior consultant had a contrary opinion:

> "I think qualified women leadership candidates are capable of interpreting the JD very well and make the right decision about whether to apply for the job. When they decide to apply for it, they will try to demonstrate their ability with full confidence."

Apart from the problem with confidence, female leaders are regarded as lacking the aspiration to pursue senior leadership positions. There is compelling evidence that women seldom make a career plan; even when they do, it is rare for them to devote their energies to pursue senior leadership positions. For example, Coleman (2001) proposes that women have no intention of applying for leadership positions in a society where managerial positions are occupied by men and where supportive positions are stereotypically held by women. Given the majority of senior leadership positions are held by males in China and the traditional perception is that women are inferior to men (Liu, 2007), it is not surprising that a limited number of women aspire to be leaders. The findings from this study parallel the results of previous research. One female headhunting firm manager said:

> "Women leaders always tell themselves that they have reached a position which they should be satisfied with."

Another consultant further explained that:

"Female leaders believe that they have put a lot of effort to gain leadership positions, which are normally not supposed to be held by women. So, they are content with their current situation and wish to spend the rest of their professional life in an easy way. They need not be in more senior ranks."

In the absence of ambition, it is hard for women to compete with men in the elite group to gain opportunities for promotion. Correll (2004) advocates that career aspiration is a significant factor in the process of leadership progression. In other words, women who desire to become a leader may positively influence their career trajectories as leaders. In this research, most headhunters agreed that there is a positive link between leadership development and an individual's aspiration. As put forward by a female headhunting firm manager:

"I think it is not others who may exclude women from senior leadership positions. Instead, it is their option to give up because they do not have the desire for those positions. Moreover, successful woman leaders must have clear career plans, which is not usual for most women."

Contrary to their Chinese counterparts, headhunters in Taiwan claimed that women in leadership positions were confident and aspired to those positions, 'It rarely happens that women leadership candidates hesitate to accept the offer in the final stage. They will stick to it when they decide to apply for the job.'

4.3 Inefficient Co-ordination and Mediation between Female Leaders and Clients

Based on the information obtained from the interviewees in this study, headhunters are far from efficient in accomplishing their roles which, as noted before, include co-ordination and mediation in the recruitment process (Khurana, 2002). There are three reasons for this: subjective decision-making in the recruitment procedure, low influence on the client, and lack of support for candidates.

Second-order theme: (3.1) Subjective decision-making. Instead of being objective and rational, the headhunting procedure is biased and subjective. When headhunters advocate the use of notions such as 'fit', 'intrinsic' and 'chemistry' to find 'the best match' in candidates, they are more likely to make decisions subjectively (Khurana 2002).

The first aspect that influences the 'best match' between women and leadership is family. It is hard for both headhunters and clients to link female leaders with effective leadership since women are labelled as the main caregiver in the family (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Thus, every woman candidate is asked about family whereas no male candidate is questioned about their family status. As one male headhunting firm manager commented:

> "For me, there is no difference in assessing male or female leaders except their family status. Because female candidates are at least 30 years old or more when they become qualified for leadership positions. This is also the time when most women get married and have children. For those who have not become a wife or mother, I ask some questions indirectly about the reasons for this and whether they have plans. For those who have married or have had children, I focus on whether their family life conflicts with their professional life. This is also the main aspect of women candidates that clients are concerned about."

Another senior male headhunter firm manager asserted that female leaders' family obligations is an indicator of how effectively they perform:

> "Female leaders are normally asked about family status due to the sociological segmentation of work. Male leaders are seldom asked such questions. Women who do not have the major responsibility in the family are more masculine than those who do. Moreover, they have a similar leadership style to men. This style is preferred by most clients since it is a common belief that a masculine leadership style can secure effective leadership."

However, a female senior consultant commented that:

> "Most female leaders do not have family obligations since they are either divorced or have no children. In this regard, they can be considered as effective as their male counterparts in terms of leadership."

The interviewees from Taiwan asserted that clients are only concerned about whether the female candidate has a little baby because this might influence their ability to undertake frequent business trips. One noted that:

> "I will determine the frequency of business trips and inform the female candidate, and leave her to decide if she wants to apply for the job."

Another aspect that impedes women from being considered qualified as leaders is leadership style (Tienari et al., 2013). This research found that headhunters admire those women leaders who possess a masculine leadership style since they believe this style can ensure effective leadership. A female senior consultant said:

> "I use the ideal candidate picture that is based on the successful male leader to assess all candidates in interviews. This includes leadership style and competencies."

A male consultant noted:

> "Male leaders have predominated in China for thousands of years. When we think of leaders, we are used to thinking of men. Because it is considered the most important element that can predict the effectiveness of leadership, a masculine leadership style is more desired than other styles."

Interestingly, one headhunter in Taiwan stated that she did not care about leadership style, but some women leaders showed up with a strong masculine style.

Finally, the fit between the person and the organization does not favor women in most

organizations. One female senior consultant commented:

> "The most commonly shared values in organizations are a high commitment to
> work, resilience in the face of high pressure, and acceptance of long working
> hours. In order to secure a PO fit, candidates are supposed to share the same
> values as the clients' organizations. However, this conflicts with most
> women's family obligations."

Less attention appears to have been paid to the diversity of organizational culture in Chinese organizations than in western countries, which can be shown by the small proportion of women who hold positions on corporate boards in China (Peus et al., 2015). Since organizational culture plays an important role in selecting leaders (Coverdill and Finlay, 1998), female leaders in China might be difficult to match with clients' organizations.

On the other hand, one female consultant mentioned an organizational culture that favors women:

> "I successfully recommended a female leader to a family-owned company because
> the internal relationships in that company were complicated."

In this case, the organizational value emphasizing the importance of relationships was regarded to fit female traits. Thus, female leaders were preferred rather than their male counterparts.

Apart from poor matching between female leaders and organizations, the way in which headhunters made their decisions of recommendations is biased since the decisions merely rely on interviews and made by one or two headhunters. According to a female senior consultant:

> "I am in charge of four major clients in the IT industry, which means I am in charge
> of making decisions about the shortlist for those clients."

Another female junior consultant added:

> "As a junior consultant, I screen CVs and submit the CVs that qualify to my manager. She decides the list of candidates. Then I carry out the first interview, and my manager will conduct the second interview and decide the shortlist."

Additionally, despite a great number of tools being available to assess candidates, research has found that headhunters prefer to make their decisions solely on the basis of their subjective judgment. This finding reinforces Tienari and his colleagues' (2013) research that shows headhunters seldom use different tools to assess the suitability of candidates; instead, they rely on their intuition. One male manager of headhunting firm explained:

> "I never try any selection tools since I doubt their reliability and validity. Instead, I decide who the best candidate for the client company based on my twenty-year expertise. This is effective because of my in-depth knowledge of the industry and the labor market, which I gained from my experience as an HR professional before I established my own company."

Another female headhunter team leader stated that:

> "There is no need for us to carry out a professional assessment of candidates, especially senior management candidates because the large corporations have a budget for this and prefer to outsource it to professional firms like North Forest, a very famous firm with expertise in psychological and other types of tests. I think my expertise in recruitment entitles me to give a relatively accurate assessment of the candidates."

Similarly, one junior female consultant asserted:

> "My manager is very experienced and she can explicitly sense who the most suitable candidate for the client company is."

Some interviewees, including the two from Taiwan, commented that clients were not influenced by the candidates' gender when making the final decisions. For example, one female senior consultant concluded that clients made decisions irrespective of gender, and instead care about who can make a large profit for the business. The reason why clients ignore the gender of candidates in the final interview is that headhunters have proven that all shortlisted female candidates are able to work in the same way as male leaders.

A male senior consultant said:

"The client need not pay much attention to the gender difference because headhunters report that the female candidates have no family burden; otherwise, those candidates are deemed to be excluded from the final interviews."

A female junior consultant also said:

"Private companies emphasize whether the candidates are trustworthy rather than their gender. If the owner of the company trusts the candidate, the latter might be permitted to deal with the business in all fields where the company is involved."

On the other hand, some informants said, gender plays a part in the final decision-making of clients either because of their gender stereotypes about women or the chemistry between candidates and clients. This confirms the findings of several researchers in western countries, such as Tallerico (2000), Doldor et al. (2012), and Bagilhole and White (2008).

Second-order theme: (3.2) Low influence with clients and inefficient support to female candidates Headhunters interact with clients and candidates in the headhunting procedure. As mentioned above, they coordinate decision-making and act as mediators between the clients and candidates (Khurana, 2002). However, this study found that headhunters have not fulfilled their roles efficiently in the Chinese context. This is illustrated by the interviewees from two perspectives. The first is the influence of

headhunters. The greatest variability of responses occurred when headhunters discussed their influence in the recruitment process. This may indicate an area where there is less consensus and consistency in the views and practices adopted. Second, a relatively low proportion of headhunters are qualified advisors in terms of career development and leadership mentoring.

Regarding the influence of headhunters in the recruitment process, interviewees hold diverse opinions. Three headhunters claim that some clients accept their advice to include the female candidate in the final interview when they prefer male candidates but on various conditions：

A female manager of a headhunting firm said:

> "I normally try to persuade my client if I have qualified female candidates when the client prefers male candidates. In my experience, they need not be better than men, as long as they are equally competent and can devote themselves to work like male leaders. I have recommended female candidates to my clients, but not all of them accept them."

One female headhunter team leader reflected:

> "When the clients state that they prefer men instead of women, I only try to influence them if the female candidate is superior to the male candidates. Otherwise it does not work."

Another headhunter team leader explained how she dealt with the client's gender preference:

> "Normally, I conduct a survey of the labor market to see how available desirable candidates are. If they are hard to find, then I will try to influence the client to change their gender preference. Most of them are willing to accept my advice."

The rest of the interviewees in Mainland China refuse to make recommendations of

female candidates when the client has a male preference because the client seldom takes their advice into consideration: One female senior consultant said:

> "There is no point trying to exert influence on the client when they target male candidates since we need to keep a very good relationship with them and what we are supposed to do is satisfy their requirements instead of challenging them."

The Taiwanese headhunters cared less about their clients' gender preference since the clients seldom emphasized it. Both of them believed they could exert some influence on their clients.

In addition to direct interaction with the client in the profiling phase, headhunters have indirect interaction with the client in the final interviews. Tienari et al. (2013) conclude in their research that headhunters cannot exert any influence at this stage because the client is the final decision-maker. Most interviewees in this study agreed with this statement. One male manager of a headhunting firm stated that:

> "The interviewers in the final interview are, in most cases, superior to most headhunters since they are all senior managers in the client companies. Therefore, they can make more accurate decisions about who is the best candidate."

The other female headhunter team leader asserted that:

> "We have no chance to influence the client since headhunters are normally information-collectors but never final decision-makers."

One male interviewee claimed that the influence of headhunters differed from case to case:

> "If the client company lacks recruitment expertise, such as no senior HR professional, they are likely to turn to headhunters for help, especially the small-to-medium-sized private companies. I make a professional report to those companies with an analysis of the candidates, and they are more likely to accept

my suggestions. For example, I recommended a female leader who not only has the technical background but also good communication skills to a private company client who desired a male leader. The client followed my suggestion and hired this leader. She is working as the head of both technology and marketing now."

Throughout the entire selection process, as noted above, headhunters also play an important role in providing support to the candidates (Manfredi et al., 2014). However, this study shows that, due to the variable competency of headhunters in China, high-quality support is difficult to secure. The interviewees provided information from two perspectives. The first was professionalism. One team-leader stated that some headhunters behave less professionally:

"The professionalism of headhunters differs dramatically in China. Some headhunters form a bad impression of candidates who hang up when they first call. This is prone to result in negative evaluation of the candidates in the following interviews."

Another male headhunter manager pointed out:

"Some headhunters conceal negative information about the client or position in order to win the case. This is because the code of behaviour for headhunting is not strictly implemented."

In addition, the ability of most headhunters to act as a professional advisor about candidates' career plans needs to be improved. One male headhunting firm manager commended:

"Some female candidates have difficulty making decisions about their career advancement. I am able to make reasonable suggestions and they are willing to accept them because I worked as an HR director in a large IT company in the past. But most headhunters do not have this ability, either due to lack of professional

background or individual capacity."

Another senior female headhunter also admitted:

"I am used to helping female leaders build up their confidence by critically analyzing their competence since I have had professional training and a number of years of experience. But it is hard for most headhunters because they may not have the capacity to give support in this regard. My method is based on a question: 'What do you want to achieve at the end of your career?' My aim is to encourage candidates to use this question as a guide to direct their career advancement."

One headhunter for a large headhunting company in Taiwan denied the company required them to carry out any work to support women leadership candidates, such as career advancement advice, while the other Taiwanese headhunter included it in her daily work by personal choice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research sought to explore how headhunting, as a recruitment and selection method, facilitates or impedes the advancement of women leaders in Chinese organizations. The findings indicated that headhunting was strongly affected by contextual issues, including the concerns of the effectiveness of a leader, the internalization of women's self-identity, cultural, economic, and political factors. Among them, political drivers, such as the paucity of women leaders in the governing party, the ineffective implementation of gender equality laws, and the absence of policies to support women with children, were the most influential factor in the selection of female leaders. Additionally, the validity of headhunting outcomes was undermined by the subjective nature of R&S. No doubt, the inefficient co-ordination, and mediation of headhunters between clients and female leaders, to a great extent, resulted in gendered headhunting practice.

Accordingly, this chapter begins by comparing issues arising from the findings with those identified in gendered headhunting in the literature. With the identification of differences between the literature and findings, the underlying factors existing in the Chinese context are interpreted.

5.1 Issues in Female Leaders' Headhunting Procedure in China

Based on the findings in Chapter 4, issues arising from the headhunting procedure in China have been formulated into three new themes (see Figure 6). First, (4.1) gendered beliefs about candidates and (4.2) low fit to leadership vacancies were integrated into contextual constraints in the headhunting procedure. Second, (4.3) less credible and reliable decision-making was divided into two groups: namely the problematic systemic R&S and the the need for improvement in the executive search industrys' capability. The new themes allow for the explicit interpretation of each aspect in headhunting practices.

5.1.1 Contextual Constraints

First, the contextual constraints are similar to the three main barriers to women's leadership advancement presented in Section 2.2 (see Figure 7), namely, discrimination, sociological pressures, and economic issues, to identify similarities and difference between China, Taiwan, and western counties.

➤ *Discrimination*

Discrimination against women leaders is more explicitly manifested in China, compared with western countries. This is contrary to expectations that it was implicit.

This explicit discrimination can be seen in the profiling phase where the gender preference was explicitly expressed in the meeting between clients and headhunters. The majority of clients believe that men are more suitable for leadership positions than women. Therefore, the influence of discrimination penetrated the whole headhunting process and consistently affected outcomes. In contrast, discrimination against women in the workplace was rarely seen in Taiwan by clients.

➤ *Sociological pressure*

In terms of sociological pressures (Section 2.1.2), findings are partially in line with the results of previous studies, while some differences emerged. The most apparent evidence that gender roles influence women in headhunting is their lack of confidence and aspiration to pursue leadership positions. This complies with women's self-identity that defines them as the main caregivers of the family in gender social roles theory (Eagly&Wood, 2016).

Among Taiwanese women, this phenomenon is rarely found. They decide whether to pursue a leadership position based on their own preference. Moreover, they are likely to stick to the career path that they choose. Women in Taiwan seem more likely to consider that leadership positions are merely a kind of work, such as doctors, which
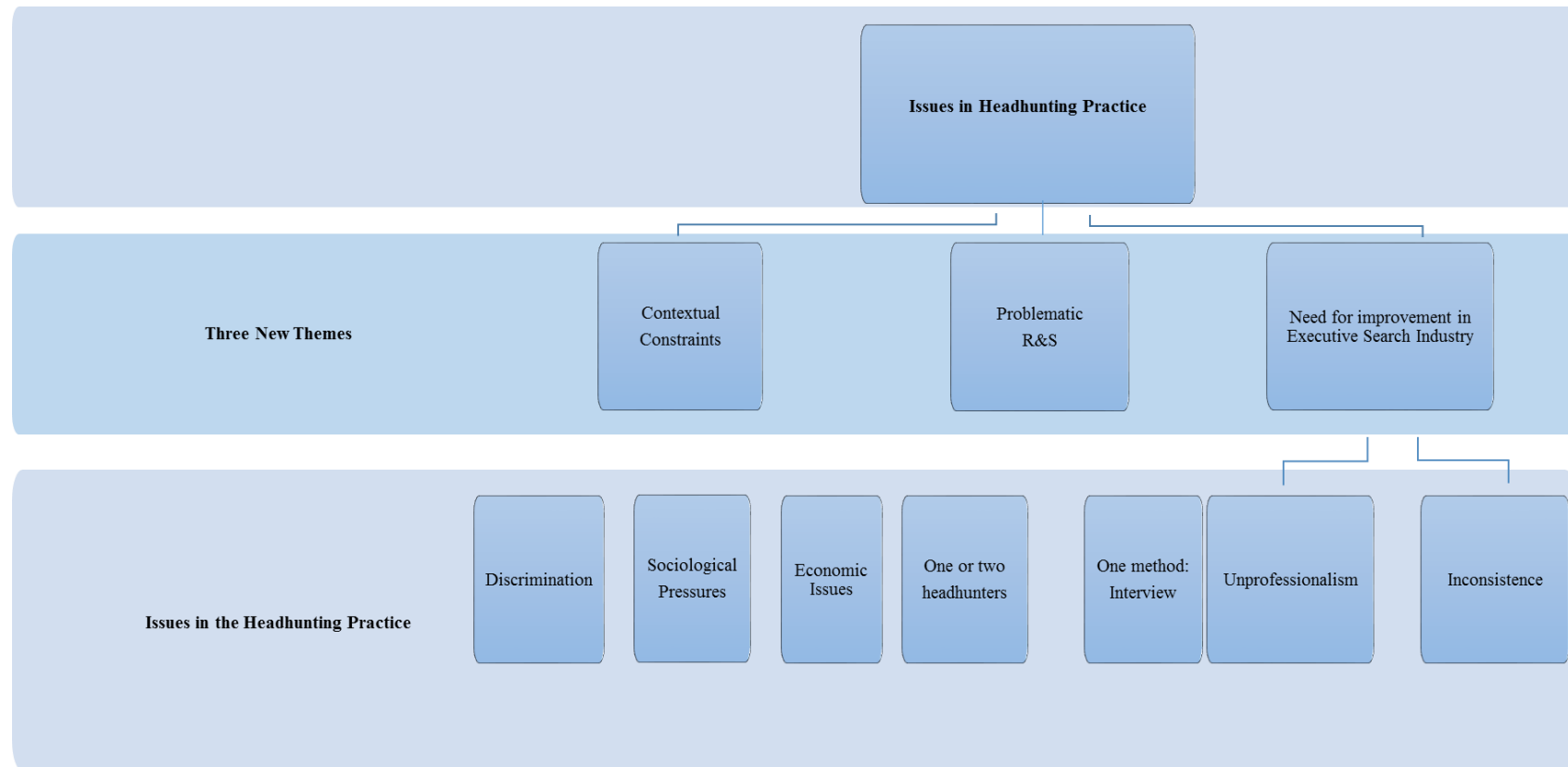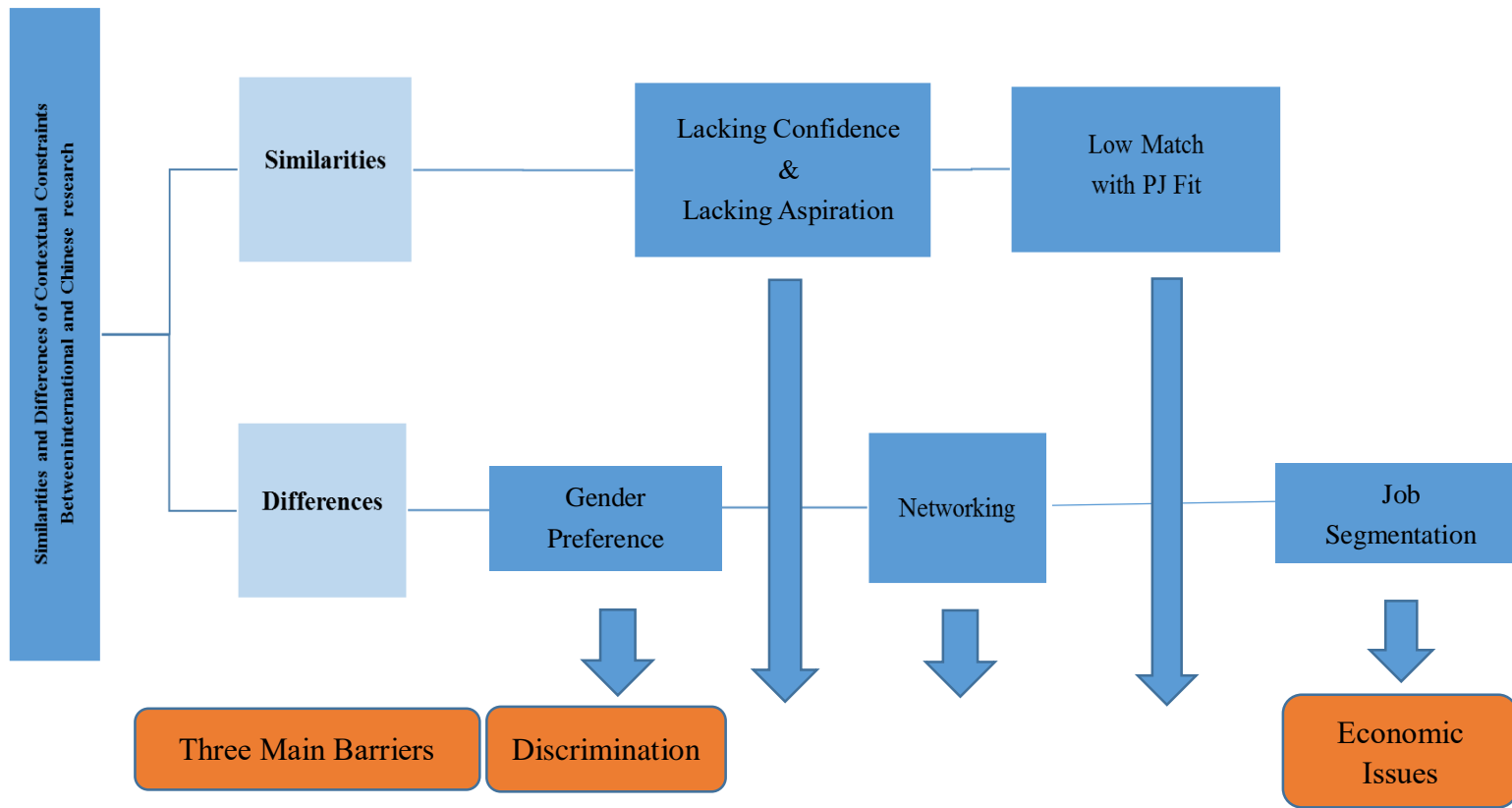
Figure 6 Three themes in headhunting practice

Figure 7 Similarities and differences between contextual constraints in Chinese and international research

have no gender stereotype. Since the different degree of modernization, egalitarian attitudes are more prominent among women in Taiwan compared with those in Mainland China (Chia, et al,1997). Also, the democratization in Taiwan facilitates the enaction of gender-equality laws and revision of the civil code. Consequently, women's status in Taiwai is improved (Yang, 2014).

The second issue derived from social pressures is the mismatch between women leaders and PJ fit – i.e. age, work experience in CV screening, and leaders' high commitment to work – in the interviewing phase. Some interviewees agreed there was a conflict for female leaders between career advancement and having children (Kalysh et al., 2016) saying the age limitation for senior leadership jobs decreased the possibility of women being selected since they might miss the vital period to climb up the organizational hierarchy due to child-bearing. On the other hand, some interviewees pointed out that children were not an obstacle for some women leaders in China since they managed to commence work after extremely short maternity leave. Similarly, other interviewees proposed that many women leaders postponed the time of having children in order to pursue top positions in organizations. This is in line with the results identified by Dye (2005), previously presented, that half the women in top leadership positions in the US do not have children. In addition, some headhunters asserted that the majority of women leaders did not have a family burden since they were divorced. This confirms the Mason and Goulden (2004) research that women are more likely to get divorced in a tenure faculty compared with men. Although similarities in marriage status and childcare issues of women in western countries and China seem to suggest that sociological issues might not be an obstacle for women's leadership advancement, divorce or delaying in having children are actually a compromise between the conflicts of women's social role and career.

Compared with women in Mainland China, Taiwanese women seem to be less impacted by the interruption of giving birth and taking care of children. The Principle of Applying for Childcare Leave for Female Workers in 1992 entitles both women and men who

working in the public sector to apply for family leave without pay for three years to take care of the new-born children. The Gender Employment Equality Law in 2002 provides the same legal right to private employees.

Lastly, the degree to which women are involved in headhunters' networks is linked with sociological pressures. Contrary to the literature, there was no restriction on female leaders' ability to access headhunters' networks in China. However, only a small number of women are active in these networks, mainly because most of them are incongruent with doing domestic work, especially taking care of children.

➢ *Economic issues*

The findings in this study match the dilemma encountered by women in western countries in terms of economic issues. Dead-end positions, as a result of the socialization of their gender roles, hinder the progress of women leaders to higher positions (Holgersson, 2012). These issues were implicit in the social job segmentation in Chinese labor markets where a limited number of female candidates presented in the search phase. However, the degree to which the job is divided by gender differs from western countries. For example, leaders are overwhelmingly dominated by men in political parties in China with merely 15 percent of female leaders in government positions throughout the country, and the higher the rank, the fewer the women (Tsang, 2011). By contrast, women in parliaments of Nordic countries was 42.5%, American was 30.6% in 2019, women constitute 38 percent of Taiwan's national legislature (n.a. 2020).

➢ *Underlying factors in the process of headhunting female leaders in China*

The underlying drivers of the perceptions about women leaders and practices implemented during the headhunting process can be divided into three main aspects: concerns about leadership effectiveness, culture, and social-political factors. Based on the findings of this research, the researcher interprets these factors in the way that: the political factor, as a most influential factor, interacted with the cultural, and economic

factors, to trigger gendered leadership recruitment and selection through headhunting.

Firstly, beliefs about what constitutes leader effectiveness seems to be the most influential driver in clients' preference for males in leadership positions, according to the findings of this study. The majority of interviewees asserted that clients paid great attention to whether the candidate could fulfill the role, irrespective of gender, in the final interviews. Debates about gender differences in leadership have grown in recent years. The male is generally linked with transactional leadership that includes the assertion of power while the female is more likely to adopt a transformational leadership style that features collaborative ways of working and empowering subordinates (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). This stems from the stereotypic view that gender difference is deemed to influence various leadership styles. With globalization and the high pace of development in modern society, some scholars argue that women are advantaged in such an environment where participative and open communication is vital for the success of organizations (Hitt et al., 1998). Within the last decade, an increasing number of researchers have revealed that there are no obvious differences between the leadership effectiveness of men and women (Hollander, 1992), only that some kinds of traits are more likely to appear in one gender rather than the other (Paustian-Underdahl, 2014). Other researchers further propose that studies should emphasize the contextual factors that contribute to the perception of gender differences in perceived leadership effectiveness rather than simply focusing on whether there is a difference in men's and women's leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003b). It is, thus, important to analyze reasons why people link males with successful leaders and women with unsuccessful leaders in the Chinese context.

Perceptions of women's managerial capability carries the burden of history, in China as elsewhere (Leung, 2003), and the current socio-cultural context (Tatli et al., 2016). Confucianism serves as the foundation of Chinese culture, and provides the central pillars of Chinese ethics and etiquette (Bond and Hwang, 1986). It initially defines relations between the sexes both at home and in the society. "Three Obediences" refers to the hierarchy of males who women should obey, namely father, brother and husband,

and "Four Virtues", outlines the appropriateness of women's behavior, (Leung, 2003). Furthermore, under another dominant conceptual principle, Daoist, in China, the conception of "yin and yang" not only explicitly expresses the differences between men and women (Faure & Fang, 2008; Li, 2008), but also strengthens the inferior role of women as domestic nurture and care provider (Cooke, 2003; Leung, 2003). This patriarchal norm extends boundary households and seeps into workplaces. In other words, women are considered to be suitable for the supportive role at work. According to Cooke (2003) and Turner (2006), women who are involved in the labor market are primarily seen as wives and mothers. This provides an explicit explanation as to why the clients and headhunters discriminate against women in the workplace by doubting the suitability of women to be in managerial posts, and worrying about the conflicts of work and family obligations when they are proved as suitable to be leaders.

Additionally, the paternalistic leadership style that prevails in Chinese organizations potentially affects the selection of leaders. Paternalistic leadership is closely associated with Chinese and Confucian customs, values and philosophy. It emphasizing long-distance and centralized authority, it enforces the dominance of men in leadership posts, and deprives women of power (Tang et al., 2010; Silin, 1976). It is, thus, more likely for people in China to portray an ideal male rather than a female leader. Chao and Farh (2010) propose that the higher the more a person holds traditional Chinese values and beliefs, the more likely this person is affected by paternalistic leadership, and vice versa. This may partially explain why some participants in this study link leadership positions with gender, but others did not.

Obviously, there is a tension between the traditional beliefs in leadership and the reality in modern society. During the command-driven economy period, the discrimination rooted in Confucianism against women was shifted by the ideology that the government adopted to limit unemployment (Cooke & Xiao, 2014), and the accompanying policy that emphasized equality of citizens, including gender (Tatli, 2016). Prejudice against women arose again after China commenced shifting to a market-driven economy (Tatli, 2016). Clients selected employees based on gender stereotypes in order to maximise

profit (Tarrant et al., 2010). However, exposure to western modernization initiated a shift toward gender equality (Yang, 1996), and organizations gradually began to recognize female talent (Tatli, 2016). Consequently, women have the chance to obtain more autonomy and compete with men in the labor market. In this sense, it seems that men's traditional breadwinner ideology is challenged (Yang,1996). Overall though, the effects of the market economy on women's participation in the workplace are far away from gender equality, despite the fast permeation of new ideas in the Chinese economy (Xu, 2005; Zuo & Tang, 2000). One of the most direct consequence of rapid economic development is the high workload, which stimulates the prevalent cluture of working long-hours (Simpson, 1998). Chinese organizations work people hard in order to maximise profits. Leaders must work long hours to advance their careers (Tarrant et al., 2010) This disadvantages women with regard to their biological characteristics, also, in terms of their dual responsibilities (Carli and Eagly, 2011).

In addition, the internalization of women's self-identity plays an important part as well. The self-identity of Chinese women is directly guided by Confucian philosophy, which states the rightness of women's behavior and the rules that they should obey in both the social and domestic sphere (Matin, 2016). This can be implied from the findings that women are less ambitious about leadership posts as well as seldom taking part in social networks. Moreover, by being described as "water" in traditional Chinese philosophies, which refers to 'softness' and 'adaptiveness', women are attributed to have traits, such as being relationship-oriented, with high-communication skill, and less assertive (Matine,2016). They are consequently prone to self-perceptions of lower commitment and drive compared with their male counterparts (Francesco and Shaffer, 2009). Due to low self-identity, most women leaders in China attribute their success to chance instead of personal accomplishment (Matine, 2016). This may illustrate, to some extent, the reason why some Mainland China female leaders in the final stages of headhunting give up the opportunities. Surprisingly, the change of mind seldom happens to female leadership candidates in Taiwan. Hence, it is necessary to use Taiwan to benchmark with Mainland China to dig out the other underlying factors.

Taiwan shares the same Confucian culture with China, but their political stands vary. Therefore, the emphasis is put on the differences of political issues between the two regions. In six core elements of inequality defined by Acker (2006), he specially stresses importance of role of government. The legitimacy of discrimination on women is informed not only by social and economic conditions, but also by the dominant political ideologies. China, as one of the most prominent countries regarding its political feature in the contemporary world, might lack the initiative to advocate for gender equality in leadership positions. This can be inferred from both the absence of women in the highest hierarchy of dominant political party and less effective implementation of discrimination law and policies supporting WLB.

The lack of state policies in supporting childcare harms womens' career trajectories. Wu and Lin (2017) conclude in their studies that the deficits in child care, especially for when children are under three-years old, places a heavy burden on women. Yang (2017) further explains that a great proportion of Chinese urban women lose their jobs due to pregnancy. The findings of this research confirm the absence of institutional support for child raising, and its consequences.

Taiwan's shared Confucianism culture with China, but different politics, emphasizes the importance of politics in gender equality. The Taiwan government advocates gender equality in leadership positions through the effective implementation of anti-discrimination laws, and 3-year parental leave from existing positions. In contrast to China, 93.54% of women returned to work in 2017 when their children can go to kindergargens (Taiwan Ministry of Labor, 2017).

The distinctive context, Chinese political context, means gender inequality is poorly addressed. Although culture, economy and womens' self-identity all have a partial influence.

5.1.2 Problematic Systemic R&S

➢ *Comparison of R&S between literature and findings*

In line with the literature on executive search in Section 2.3, this study shows that headhunting is a subjective process in China, influenced by contextual factors.

First, the job analysis of leadership positions was gendered as asserted in the literature. Some interviewees mentioned that JDs were based on successful male leaders in Chinese corporations. Interestingly, interviewees insisted that JDs were an objective presentation without gender bias. However, most women leaders refused the opportunities offered by headhunters. This may be partially influenced by their social roles, and also implies that the JDs, which were set according to male leaders and contained masculine wording, made women leaders feel that they did not belong to this group (Bohnet, 2016). Moreover, the selection procedure was subjective since it depended heavily on one or two headhunters who were responsible for the case. Because of the character of their work, headhunters seldom shared information about their candidates with other people, which decreased the possibility of overcoming any bias they might possess. Finally, HR practitioners were unaware of, or distrusted, the results of psychological tests (Tienari et al., 2013). Interviewees confirmed that interviews were the predominant method they used to assess candidates without other tools that could assist in the decision-making because they relied on their judgement and doubted the reliability of other tests. Therefore, the headhunting procedure, which depends heavily on subjective decisions, is similar to that in western countries.

➤ *Reasons for existing problems in headhunting selection*

Headhunting practice was influenced by both cultural and social beliefs in favor of men as leaders. As mentioned before, the two key elements in determining the selection of candidates are the criteria and the procedure (Salgado, 2017). The findings revealed that the leadership criteria were set up based on successful male leaders, and the procedure relied on a single subjective method to assess the suitability of candidates.

5.1.3 Need to improve the executive search industry

The final issue interfering with successful female headhunting in China is problems

with the industry itself.

Three themes appeared in the findings that are associated with this issue: namely, insufficient influence, inadequate monitoring ability, and variable quality. In order to have a better understanding of the headhunting industry, these themes were reorganized into two new themes. Insufficient influence and inadequate monitoring ability are conceptualized as 'unprofessionalism' which is associated with headhunters' competencies and code of behaviour, and variable quality is conceptualized as 'inconsistencies', which relate to the variation in headhunter professionals' practice.

➢ *Low professionalism*

The findings confirm the statement of Glückler and Armbruster (2003) that headhunters' professionalization is weak due to the lack of service standards and professional identity. This was reflected from two aspectives in this study.

Firstly, there are no entry requirements to assess the competence of a headhunter in most ESFs in China because of the absence of service standards (iResaerch, 2016). According to co-ordination theory, the communal objectives of the three parties interacting in the procedure (Britton et al., 2000) should be fulfilled by cooperation between them. Lack of competence may reduce headhunters' contribution to clients as well as candidates. Interviewees proposed that most headhunters were merely information-collectors rather than strategic partners in most cases because they possess no strong background that could support them to fulfill the role of competent decision-makers in the selection of leaders. Additionally, the defects of headhunters also limited their ability to provide career development support to candidate.

Secondly, the lack of a shared professional identity leads to the absence of a code of behaviour (Bendl et al., 2013). The service of headhunting is different from other professions, such as lawyers or accountants, which have strict requirements for certification. Headhunters have no clear professional image available (Bendl et al., 2013). Also, well-known associations have failed to formulate a code of behaviour or

supervise their conduct in China (iResaerch, 2016). Not surprisingly, the study discovered problems in the selection of leaders in this process, such as unconscious discrimination against women. This was implied by interviewees in their questions about women's family status.

➢ *Inconsistencies*

This study confirms that headhunters and their influence vary dramatically in China (iResaerch, 2016). Firstly, with regard to service quality, headhunters belonging to different companies are subject to different training and behaviour requirements. Some interviewees mentioned that their company had strict instructions about the behaviour of headhunters to increase fairness in the process. Similarly, some interviewees had a strong concern about professional ethics during the selection process because of training provided by their companies. Secondly, the influence of headhunters is variable due to the difference in their competency. While the majority of headhunters exert minor influence in the headhunting process, some headhunters are able to act as a strategic partner for both the clients and the candidates. In fact, those headhunters who previously worked in HR professional roles or are familiar with the industry in which they provide services, are highly competent in the selection of leadership candidates. This is mainly attributed to their relationship with the client companies or a comprehensive understanding of the job advertised. Similarly, those headhunters have equal status with their candidates, which enables them to influence their candidates regarding leadership positions offered. In other words, female leaders are more likely to accept qualified headhunters' suggestions about their career path. In this sense, the role of headhunters as a mediator is able to be fulfilled. However, in this research, this group of headhunters mainly consisted of managers, such as owners of headhunter companies or team leaders with more than ten years' related working experience, and only accounted for a small proportion of people in most private headhunting companies. Given the emerging issues in the Chinese headhunting industry, the cause and effect of this will be analyzed in the following section.

According to a study conducted by Yu (2015), the Taiwanese headhunting industry also consists of various types of firms; thus, service quality differs between them. The proportion of high-quality service is low. However, compared with Mainland China, the Taiwanese headhunting industry may be better regulated by the implementation of of relevant employment law, and the strict code of behaviour for individual organizations. This may ensure higher professionalism and service quality compared with headhunting in Mainland China.

5.2 Emerging Issues in the Chinese Headhunting Industry

After taking a further look at the process of headhunting female leaders in China, this study identifies that the outcomes are dramatically influenced by three main factors: the size of headhunting companies, the features of clients' companies, and the gender of headhunters. This section attempts to elicit a deeper understanding of the Chinese headhunting industry by analyzing the difference between these factors.

5.2.1 Size of Headhunting Companies: Large vs Small

The size of headhunting companies leads to three main differences: focus of business, types of service, and position in the industry (Figure 8).

Firstly, with regard to the focus of the business, large networking headhunting companies emphasize the efficiency of their work while small firms concentrate on the relationship with both the clients and candidates. Of the thirteen interviewees, five belonged to the large networking companies. All of them preferred to use the company database either to search for candidates or ask for recommendations, including one interviewee from a Taiwanese international headhunting company. By contrast, headhunters belonging to small private companies were used to consulting high-end talent in their networks to get recommendations; the other interviewee from a small-sized Taiwanese consulting firm is in this group.

There were two reasons for the behaviour of big organisations: the huge storage of CVs in their databases and the high volume of cases they were exposed to every day. A female team leader working in a large networking headhunting company noted:

> "When getting a job offer, I assign the search work to my subordinates who usually begin their search in our database. Because, first, we have a huge number of talents' CVs stored which have been accumulated through a 20-year operation with more than one hundred networks throughout China. Also, because of the high volume of work, we have to be very efficient. Searching the database to find qualified candidates is the least time-consuming method."

The female interviewee from a Taiwan international company relied heavily on their database, stating that the majority of talent in Taiwan was stored on the database since it had been operating for more than twenty years. By contrast, the interviewees from small headhunting companies lacked the huge storage of talent CVs and had fewer cases at hand compared with their counterparts in large companies. Therefore, they normally relied on their relationships in the talent market to search for prospective candidates. Moreover, these interviewees stressed that they were used to spending time in building a relationship with their clients and candidates to secure cooperation. On the one hand, a good relationship with clients is likely to result in a better outcome, especially in China, where 'Guanxi' is considered the most important factor to secure a good business result (Ren & Chadee, 2017). Common features of the three owners of small headhunting companies who were interviewed were that they all worked as HR-related professionals in large companies in the past, which contributed to their good relationship with clients and guaranteed their advantages in the specific industry. The clients also appreciated cooperating with such small firms because the owners of these firms possessed accurate and holistic information about them, which was deemed to contribute to a better result compared with outside search professionals with limited information. On the other hand, headhunters in small executive searching firms concentrate on personalized service for their candidates in order to build a good

relationship with their candidates. Because there is a high possibility that potential candidates become future clients (Britton, 2000). The need for business development can be, thus, satisfied by the 'Guanxi' with the candidates as well.

As having a different business focus, the types of services differed between large and small companies. In other words, the former were more highly standardized while the latter were more flexible. Standardised service was inferred from the conversation with the interviewees of the large networking companies:

> "Our company has fixed procedures and methods to conduct headhunting. For example, we search the database to locate potential candidates in most circumstances. Discussion with the clients to clarify requirements or information about the candidates is minimal since we normally choose candidates who match the JDs 100 percent. This is also supported by our huge talent storage."

Other headhunters of large companies confirmed that they seldom put effort into persuading clients to consider female candidates when the clients preferred males as they believed it was a waste of time.

Some participants stressed that small companies were willing to provide customized service since their priority was developing the busines. One male owner of a headhunting company stated that he sometimes could provide a human resource management strategy for private client companies during the headhunting procedure. Another female senior headhunter claimed that she was well-known in the cosumer-goods industry since she normally spent a great amount of time communicating with her clients throughout the whole procedure, even after the employment of her candidates. This enabled her to become more expert in selection on behalf of her clients by clarifying expectations between clients and candidates.

5.2.2 Features of Clients: Large MNCs vs small private firms

This study shows that features of clients' companies, such as ownership and the
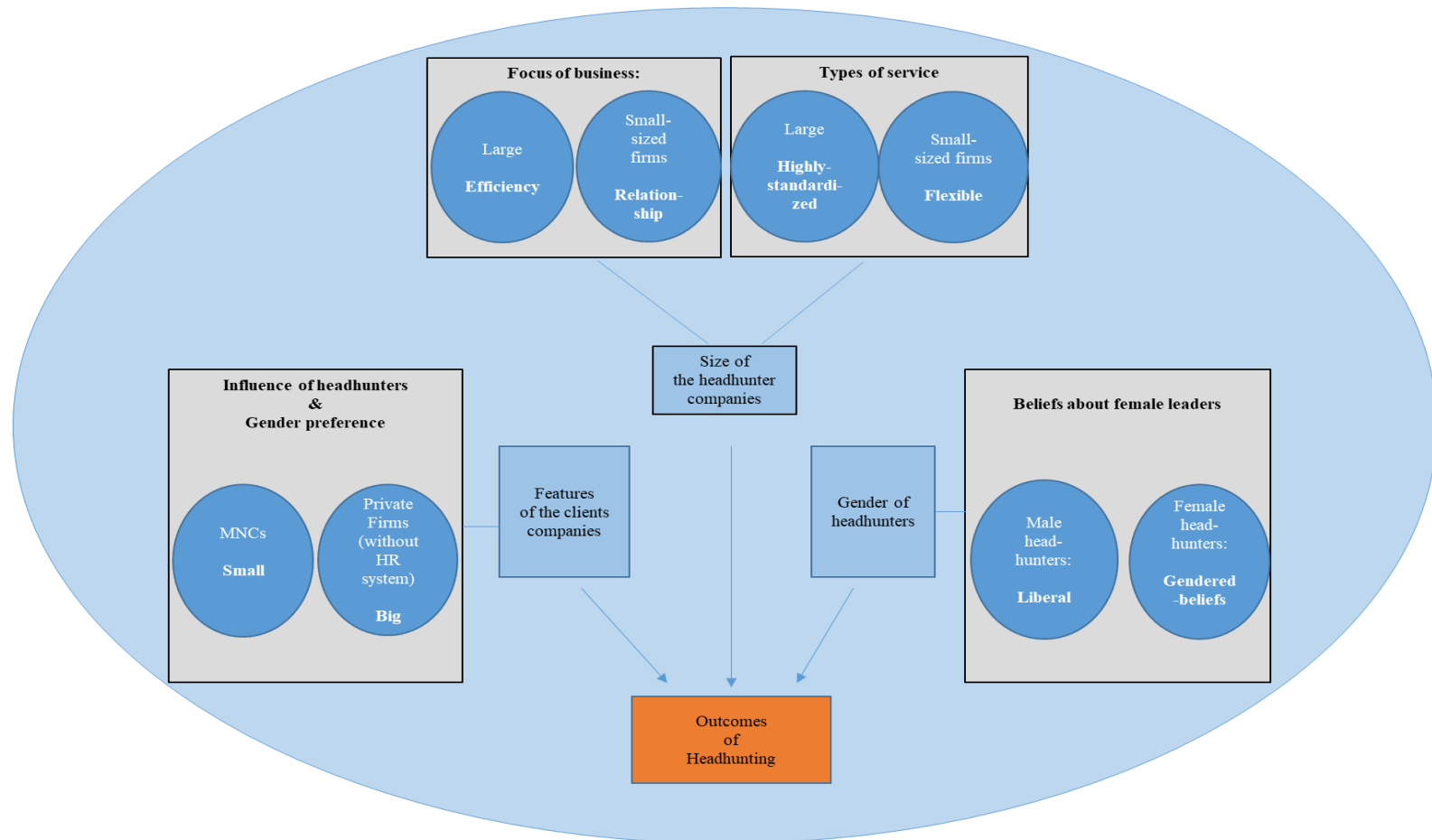
Figure 8: Features of headhunting industry

sophistication of the human resource system, can influence the outcomes of headhunting.

According to the participants, the size of corporations determines how well their HR system performs. In other words, the bigger the clients' companies, the better their HR systems. As previously illustrated by the interviewees, the clients' companies were more likely to depend on their expertise when their HR systems were absent or weak; thus, headhunters' influence became more obvious. In contrast, large client companies with strong HR systems were less likely to be influenced by outside professionals. This limited research can be used to make a comparison with findings in the western context.

Similarly, ownership of the clients' companies had a major impact on the selection process. According to one female owner of a headhunting firm, the 'big boss' phenomenon exists in China, regardless of the size of the company. This is more likely to trigger subjective decision-making with a gender bias in small companies compared with their large counterparts which utilize comprehensive criteria to reduce the possibility of biased assessment.

5.2.3 Gender of Headhunters: Male vs Female

The gender of headhunters was one of the factors that led to different results in the selection process. Compared with male headhunters, female headhunters possessed more gendered beliefs about women candidates. This was inferred from the opinion of two female headhunters who expressed their unwillingness to deal with women candidates due to their gender traits, such as lacking confidence and difficulties in decision-making. This, on the one hand, might be derived from female headhunters' negative experience with female leadership candidates, which interacted with their stereotypes about themselves, reinforce their gendered beliefs, i.e. women are not suitable leaders; On the other hand, it might be similar with the "Queen Bee" phenomenon, which refers to the senior women leaders distance themselves from junior subordinates (Derks et al., 2016) on the purpose to adjust their behavior to the dominant

masculine culture to seek individual success (Kanter, 1987). Although, female headhunters are not female leaders working in masculine organizations, their daily work is to support male clients. This makes it possible for the occurrence of the "Queen Bee" phenomenon.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction:

This thesis has explored how headhunting, as a selection method, can influence the advancement of female leaders in Chinese corporations. The findings reflect that the outcomes of women leaders' selection through headhunting are not achieved by a simple nor straightforward process. Instead, they are derived from constraints in the supply and demand side, problems in the R&S system, and features of the headhunting industry. These issues are also influenced by cultural beliefs, economic and political factors in the Chinese context, among which, the political factor is considered as the most influential factor. An exploratory research method was employed because of its appropriateness in researching less explored areas: in this thesis, China, and this topic, the headhunting of female leaders. In addition, because this method advocates interaction between the researcher and the researched, the researcher is able to take part in the process and use her previous experience in headhunting to assess the reliability and validity of the responses. This research focuses on the scarcely investigated topic, i.e the role of headhunters in the advancement of female leadership in the context of China, which may offer opportunities to both scholars and practitioners to improve the proportion of women leaders presenting themselves for selection in the Chinese context.

This chapter begins by revisiting key aspects discussed in the findings and discussion chapters to answer the research questions and fulfill the research objectives. This is followed by the contribution of the research. The research implications are illustrated by a number of issues that may improve the proportion of women in senior leadership positions in Chinese corporations from the headhunting perspective. Finally, research limitations and implications for future research are discussed.

6.2. Revisiting the Research Questions and Objectives

This study has focused on exploring the role of headhunting in the advancement of women's leadership in Chinese corporations. Therefore, the following research question is deemed to have been addressed:

What is the role headhunting plays in advancing female leadership in corporations in China?

The findings reveal that the influence of headhunting on female leadership advancement has three aspects. The first is contextual constraints. A comparison of international and Chinese research about barriers to women's leadership progression confirms the universal existence of obstacles facing women in managerial posts. While women's lack of confidence and aspiration, and a low female fitting with leadership positions are similar between China and western countries, the male gender preference, networking, and job segmentation are different. The underlying factors leading to this phenomenon include effectiveness of leaders, privilege leadership style, cultural-economy, women's self-identificantion and political factors. The political drivers become more salient when traditional Chinese culture and the effectiveness of leader are challenged by modern social concepts. The small proportion of female leaders in the highest hierarchy of the political party, the lack of initiatives to launch gender equality programs and interventions aimed at supporting women in organizations demonstrates that a political declaration of gender equality in China is far from being realized. This is deduced from findings in Taiwan where female leaders occupy relatively high proportion in the governing party, and gender equality is secured by effectively implemented laws.

Secondly, besides contextual barriers to women's advancement, problems of R&S play a negative role in the practice of headhunting. The assessment criteria are based on successful male leaders, as in other countries. However, the procedure is less reliable because it relies on headhunters' subjective judgment that, in most circumstances,

disadvantages women. Unlike in the literature, psychological tests in China are, in most circumstances, carried out by the third-party professional organizations rather than headhunters.

The last aspect that hinders women leaders' advancement is the competency of headhunters. This was identified as the most influential factor that triggers unprofessionalism and inconsistency in the industry. Through analyzing headhunters, a deeper understanding of the headhunting industry in China was obtained. The study reveals that the outcomes of headhunting are influenced by the size of headhunting companies, the size and ownership of clients' companies, and the gender of headhunters. Generally speaking, the size of either headhunting companies or clients' companies can partially determine the maturity of the HR system which can reduce the influence of both headhunters and final decision-makers through comprehensive, objective criteria for talent selection. Moreover, the size of headhunting companies partially determines the type of service they offer based on their business focus. The big companies focus on efficiency with the support of their huge database and, thus, provide a highly-standardized service; whereas, small companies offer flexible personalized service because of a smaller database of talent, and concentrate on relationship-building. Finally, the gender of headhunters contributes to varied views about women leaders. Interestingly, while male headhunters possess a more liberal view, their female counterparts hold a more gendered view. It reflects that women have gender discrimination against women, and the existence of the "Queen Bee" phenomenon between female headhunters and candidates.

6.3 Researcher's Reflection on the Findings

In the accomplishment of this thesis, a number of important issues have been drawn to the researcher's attention. As an interprevist researcher, the researcher intends to interpret those issues based on the individual work experience as a previous headhunter

in China and a mother of two boys in personal life.

As an owner of a small headhunting company, I had personal experience relating to competition with large networking companies. One of my client companies was a German-owned large manufacturing corporation, introduced to me by a friend that had an urgent case of a production-director at hand. They switched their vendor from a famous headhunting company in Hong Kong to my firm.

> "They (headhunters in Hong Kong) did not have a higher quality of service but charged 5 percent higher commission than you. You did a very good job by offering an adequate number of candidates and providing a comprehensive summary of work experience about each of them. It is helpful to have such a summary to make a comparison between candidates. In particular, the 'consultant recommendation' section gave us the impression that you have paid great attention to our case."

The winning of this case depended on several vital elements. First was the high-quality service and low commission. While the fees of large and small headhunting companies were fixed, the personalized service made a deep impression on the client and eventually contributed to the successful recommendation. Besides, Guanxi is a vital element for the survival of small businesses in China. This client was recommended by my social networks, which I established when working as a senior secretory in a well-known large computer corporation. I put great effort into maintaining 'Guanxi' because it could increase my chances of gaining business.

Furthermore, my experience as a headhunter in dealing with female leaders is also valuable to share. In my five-year headhunting professional life, I was involved in several impressive cases associated with female leaders. They had two overt traits in common: first, they all gained a great reputation as leaders because of their competence, cooperative working attitude, and good performance; second, they possessed optimistic attitudes towards work-life balance. The first trait may imply that women are equally

qualified in the workplace as their male counterparts, even for positions that are traditionally held by men. The second trait indicates that some women leaders can handle the conflict between work and life. Women began to join the workforce in the Mao era, and have stayed there for around 50 years. They are hard-working and can make compromises for their family without thinking about their own well-being. This is a common feature of the majority of Chinese women of my generation and the past generation. Therefore, they can manage to make money and take care of their families at the same time.

In this sense, society should provide more opportunities for women to realize their individual value and contribute to the development of organizations and society as a whole. However, the social-political environment is so salient in China that one party totally controls society. As put forward that values can be implemented by imposing top-down policies. Therefore, it is more likely that an initiative can be easily launched and executed in the whole country when the political party intent to do.

Regarding the practice of headhunting female leaders, I normally followed the clients' gender preference because women candidates were often scarce in the labor market in such cases. In some cases, I might put one female leader on the longlist even if she was less competent for the position compared with her male counterparts, to make sure the longlist was filled with adequate candidates. This was also commonly used in the formulation of the shortlist in rare circumstances when qualified candidates were extremely hard to find. I abandoned this practice after one female candidate expressed her frustration at being rejected in the final interview. To be honest, I did not pay attention to gender if the clients did not require me to, since the ultimate goal of headhunting is to accomplish the case to earn the commission. I believe both men and women can be effective leaders. However, gender is always associated with relative work experience, which guarantees good performance, and is hard for most women to accumulate.

Reasons why women lack suitable qualifications, especially work experience, can be

seen in my personal life. The first job I got was as a senior secretary. Among more than 70 secretaries in our company, only three were male. The majority of males presented in system development or sales positions. This is the picture of job segmentation in most of large companies, without any changes to this day. I changed to the job of headhunter when my husband found a new job in another city. The headhunting business operated smoothly before I had my second child. Two children required more of my attention, and there was no doubt I needed to quit my job as my husband could support the whole family. This was not only from the perspective of social roles but also from financial considerations, which also result from the different jobs that men and women are engaged in. In this sense, it seems that the absence of work-life balance interventions in China is not a determining hindrance to women's leadership advancement, especially for those who are used to bearing double obligations. Instead, social roles and the consequent job segmentation seem to determine the possibility of women's upward mobility.

6.4 Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to the literature of recruitment and selection and women's leadership advancement by combining the knowledge and research from literature areas that are normally analyzed separately, such as barriers to women's leadership advancement research and executive selection. First, to the researcher's knowledge, this study is one of the few research that examines the role of headhunting in women's leadership advancement in the context of China, since the majority of research undertaken has been in the context of western countries. Second, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering an understanding of headhunters' perceptions of women leaders and the factors that have an impact on their perceptions.

This thesis also makes practical contributions by revealing how headhunting practice is carried out, and issues that might influence the outcomes of female leaders' selection.

Moreover, it is the first time the interaction between the three parties – clients, candidates and headhunters – is highlighted, which gives practitioners holistic information about the whole process. Finally, it points out aspects that need to be improved. The headhunting industry should be regulated not only to include detailed requirements to ensure competency but also to reinforce professionalism. In order to effectively conduct headhunting, headhunters should be provided with proper training in terms of knowledge, skills, and codes of behavior. For example, in tactics for assessing candidates, and how to address ethical issues.

6.5 Pratical Implications

As the research has focused on headhunting female leaders, it reflects the opportunities which might facilitate the upward mobility of women leaders through headhunting from several perspectives.

➢ Social level:

● The government needs to enforce the implementation of anti-discrimination law.

● The government needs to develop comprehensive regulations for the executive search industry to ensure headhunting professionalism.

● The headhunting association should take responsibilities for training talent search professionals to improve their competency.

➢ Organizational level:

● Clients' companies need to ensure their criteria for selection are well-formulated, and can, to a great extent, reduce the bias of interviewers, both in-house and externally.

● Headhunting firms should set up a detailed code of behaviour to improve the

professionalism of headhunters and also to secure a good reputation.

- Regular training in individual search firms is also strongly recommended to raise the competency of headhunters.

- Executive search firms should clearly define headhunters' level based on their competency and experience to make sure the service they provide can meet the expectation of both the clients and the candidates.

➢ Individual level:

- Headhunters are encouraged to take every chance (such as media, social networks) to gain a more in-depth understanding of the industries they serve. This may help them choose the most appropriate candidate for clients.

- Since the majority of headhunters are female, it may be appropriate for them to take part in social networks with female leaders. By communicating with them, female headhunters can learn more about female leaders and thus make objective assessments irrespective of gender.

- It is strongly recommended that female leaders take part in more social network activities, by which they may gain more information about job opportunities and, most importantly, learn how other women juggle their career and family. The more successful the women leaders who take part in social networks, the more likely that other women will aspire to the challenge of leadership positions.

6.6 Research Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This thesis opens opportunities for future research on the executive search for women leaders. Firstly, a research sample of thirteen headhunters, though distributed geographically, might not be representative of the whole industry since there are numerous headhunters in the whole of China. To enrich the data, more participants

should be involved when time limitations are less intense. Secondly, given that the outcomes of headhunting are the result of the interaction of the three parties, the findings may be confirmed through engagement with clients and candidates as well as headhunters, although it is beyond the scope of the Master's thesis. Thirdly, since diverse types of headhunting firms exist in China, a focus on a specific type might identify whether different types of firms' have an impact on women leaders in the same ways.

6.7 Concluding Remarks:

It is hoped that this research can provide headhunters with opportunities to reflect on their practice, especially the selection of female leaders. Headhunting is not merely a 'buy and sell' service, it is vital for both the development of organizations and individual candidates. Therefore, to work as headhunters, people must bear ethical issues in mind and have the competence to offer a professional service. As noted by a male headhunting manager: "What we do may have a great influence on an organization's development and an individual's whole career advancement. So, we must be responsible for both our clients and candidates."

Meanwhile it is expected that, through this research, women leaders or professional women can gain insight into headhunting practice and gain information that can facilitate or hinder their career trajectories. It is also suggested that women should set up their career goals at the beginning of their careers in order to accumulate the experience that enables them to compete for managerial positions. As a female headhunter remarked: "Successful women leaders are all clear about what they desire. They can set up a goal and just strive for it."

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Appendix 1

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW

Exploring Female Leadership Advancement in Chinese Corporations:

Selection for Senior Positions through Headhunting

CONSENT TO AUDIO INTERVIEW

This consent form will be held for five years.

Researcher: Li Yan, School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington.

• I have read the Information Sheet and the project has been explained to me. My questions have

been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.

• I agree to take part in an audio-recorded interview.

I understand that:

• I may withdraw from this study at any point before March 1st, 2020, and any information that I

have provided will be returned to me or destroyed.

• The identifiable information I have provided will be destroyed on March 1st, 2020

• Any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and the supervisor.

• I understand that the findings may be used for a Master's dissertation.

• I understand that the recordings will be kept confidential to the researcher and the supervisor.

I consent to information or opinions which I have given being Yes ☐   No ☐

attribute to me in any reports on this research

I would like a copy of the recording of my interview Yes ☐   No ☐

I would like a copy of the transcript of my interview Yes ☐   No ☐

I would like a summary of my interview Yes ☐   No ☐

I would like to receive a copy of the final report and have added my email Yes ☐   No ☐

address below.

Signature of participant: _____

Name of participant: _____

Date: _____

Contact details: _____

Appendix 2

CONSENT TO VIDEO INTERVIEW

Exploring Female Leadership Advancement in Chinese Corporations:

Selection for Senior Positions through Headhunting

CONSENT TO VIDEO INTERVIEW

This consent form will be held for five years.

Researcher: Li Yan, School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington.

• I have read the Information Sheet and the project has been explained to me. My questions have

been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.

• I agree to take part in a vedio-recorded interview.

I understand that:

• I may withdraw from this study at any point before March 1st, 2020, and any information that I

have provided will be returned to me or destroyed.

• The identifiable information I have provided will be destroyed on March 1st, 2020

• Any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and the supervisor.

• I understand that the findings may be used for a Master's dissertation.

- I understand that the recordings will be kept confidential to the researcher and the supervisor.

I consent to information or opinions which I have given being attribute to me in any reports on this research   Yes ☐   No ☐

I would like a copy of the recording of my interview   Yes ☐   No ☐

I would like a copy of the transcript of my interview   Yes ☐   No ☐

I would like a summary of my interview   Yes ☐   No ☐

I would like to receive a copy of the final report and have added my email   Yes ☐   No ☐
address below.

Signature of participant: _____

Name of participant: _____

Date: _____

Contact details: _____

Appendix 3

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Exploring Female Leadership Advancement in Chinese Corporations:

Selection for Senior Positions through Headhunting

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

You are invited to take part in this research. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to participate, thank you for considering this request.

My name is Li Yan and I am a Master's student in Human Resource Management and Industrial Relations at Victoria University of Wellington. This research project is work towards my thesis.

This project aims to identify the barriers Chinese women leaders facing in the advancement of their career, the role played by head-hunters in this process and, eventually, assist females' leaders to facilitate their career development through head-hunters. Your participation will support this research by stimulating the attention of both the business world and academic institutions paid to the role of head-hunters in the process of female leaders' selection, and eventually, accelerate the development of women leadership in China. This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee with the reference number: 27997.

You have been invited to participate because you have experience in the selection of female leaders. If you agree to take part, I will interview you in the place where is either near your office or your home. I will ask you questions about the headhunting of female leaders. The interview will take approximately an hour. I will audio/videorecord the interview with your permission and write it up later. You can choose to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason. You can withdraw from the study by contacting me at any time before March 1st, 2020, if you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

This research is confidential*. This means that the researcher named below will be aware of your identity but the research data will be combined and your identity will not be revealed in any reports, presentations, or public documentation.

Only my supervisors and I will read the notes or transcript of the interview. The interview transcripts, summaries and any recordings will be kept securely, and destroyed on March 1st, 2024.

The information from my research will be used in my Masters

You do not have to accept this invitation if you don't want to. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

• choose not to answer any question;

• ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;

• withdraw from the study before March 1st, 2020;

• ask any questions about the study at any time;

• receive a copy of your interview recording;

• receive a copy of your interview transcript;

• read over and comment on a written summary of your interview;

• be able to read any reports of this research by emailing the researcher to request a copy.

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either me or my supervisor:

Student:
Name: Li Yan
University email address:
Yanli1@myvuw.ac.nz

Supervisor:
Name: Dr Geoff Plimmer
Role: Supervisor
School: Management
Email: Geoff.Plimmer@vuw.ac.nz

Human Ethics Committee information

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Victoria University HEC Convenor: Dr Judith Loveridge. Email hec@vuw.ac.nz or telephone +64-4-463 6028.

Appendix 4

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Part A aims to realize the first research purpose:

To identify barriers Chinese women leaders facing in the advancement of their care:

- What are the barriers to female leaders' career advancement?

Part B intends to fulfill the second and third research purposes:

To identify the mechanism of the headhunting for female leaders in China and identify underlying factors influencing headhunting practice of female leaders:

- What are the JDs for leadership positions like?

- How do you search for potential candidates？

- What are the criteria for CV-screen?

- What are criteria for interviews?

- Would you recall any impressive female leaders in your working?

- What is your openior about female leaders

- How do female leaders perform in the procedure of headhunting?

Part C concentrates on the last research purpose:

Examine to what extent the headhunter act as a hinder or enabler to women leadership progression

- From the headhunters' perspective, what role do you think headhunters may play in the procedure of female leaders' recruitment?

- Do you think it is possible for headhunters to exert any influence in the selection procedure, if so, in which way?

- Do you have any suggestion for them to be successfully employed by clients?