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Becoming a Polyphonic Individual: Chinese Female Doctors' Working and Family Experience

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Abstract

The scholarship on Chinese womanhood has highlighted a split female subjectivity and fostered an enduring image of Chinese women as victims. Going beyond this image, the current study sought to explore how Chinese female doctors construct a polyphonic individual selfhood through flexible practices of coordination and adjustment on the continuum between work and family commitments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 female physicians working at a private hospital in Shanghai. Analysis of the data revealed that these professional women presented themselves as individuals striving for career development who also had to address gender stereotypes in their workplaces. Based on our findings, we argue that female medical workers in China shape an inclusive notion of the gendered self by mediating work and family commitments and integrating them into a polyphonic form of subjectivity.

Keywords: Chinese womanhood; Chinese individualisation; professional woman; medical workers; work–family relationship

1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s, post-Mao China has seen the rise of women as individuals striving for personal career development. Accordingly, Chinese women are increasingly expected to be independent, knowledgeable and competent subjects (F. Liu 2014). The resulting discourse of female autonomy has focused on career-related elements such as financial independence and professional self-realisation as measures of female emancipation and gender equality (Croll 1995).

China is not the only country in which more and more women are joining the workforce. In Western societies, a revolution in the role of women, fuelled by economic changes since the 1970s, has generated a new gender ideology 'by creating an egalitarian code of honor and identity for men and women that fits the evolving circumstances' (Hochschild and Machung 2003, p. 269). Women in Western societies have gained more financial independence and personal autonomy both at home and in the workplace. Research in various societal settings has shown that when more women enter the workplace, attitudes towards relationships shift from traditional to relatively egalitarian (Friedman and Weissbrod 2005; Öun 2012; Pimentel 2006; Tu and Liao 2005).

Despite the increasing emphasis on women's career development, gender inequalities persist. Ridgeway (2011) argued that the societal patterns of gender inequality are practised and consolidated through social relations. People use sex and gender together in their everyday lives as a basic framework for defining themselves and others, organising social

Check for updates

Received: 3 July 2026
Revised: 2 August 2026
Accepted: 7 August 2026
Published: 10 August 2026

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interactions and coordinating their behaviours. In these social processes, 'gender inequality is rewritten into new economic and social arrangements as they emerge, preserving that inequality in modified form over socioeconomic transformations' (Ridgeway 2011, p. 7). Moreover, persistent gender inequalities are evident in women's experience of conflict between work and family commitments. Blair-Loy (2003) proposed the cultural schemas of work devotion and family devotion to understand women's work–family conflict, arguing that these schemas 'create an interdependent system that reproduces gendered inequality' (p. 180) and lead working women to 'simultaneously conform to and challenge gendered social structures' (p. 185).

Echoing the above observations, Chinese women face various workplace challenges rooted in the patriarchal culture of the neoliberal economy and the authoritarian socialist state (Xie 2021). J. Liu (2017) indicated that the Chinese workplace is characterised by implicit organisational mechanisms involving women's naturalisation, objectification and commercialisation. Consequently, women are regarded as second-class employees, and their agency is constrained by male privilege. Zhang (2001) argued that women's sexuality/femininity is exploited to maintain the masculine hierarchy of the prevailing organisational culture. Xie (2021) revealed widespread, systematic discrimination against white-collar professional women in recruitment and promotion in present-day China.

Although existing research has extensively examined the contradictory gender expectations faced by Chinese professional women, it has largely conceptualised their subjectivity as divided between career aspirations and traditional family responsibilities. This emphasis tends to reproduce an image of women as passive victims of work–family conflict and pays insufficient attention to how they actively coordinate career, family and selfhood in everyday life. Moreover, limited research has examined these processes among female medical professionals. This study addresses these gaps by developing the concept of "polyphonic individuality" to explain how Chinese female doctors construct a coordinated and relational form of subjectivity across their work and family commitments.

This study focuses on a specific group of professional women in China—female medical workers in a private hospital—and examines their self-formation of subjectivity by investigating how they balance work and family commitments. In the following sections, we review the literature on Chinese womanhood before elucidating the conceptualisation of 'polyphonic individuality', a novel term that we propose as a lens through which to explore the subjective complexities of the lives of Chinese professional women. We then describe our research setting and methods. Finally, before concluding, we present the findings of our data analysis. Our main argument is that female medical workers in China shape an inclusive notion of the gendered self by mediating work and family commitments and integrating them into a polyphonic form of subjectivity.

2. Literature Review: Split Chinese Womanhood and the Conceptualisation of Polyphonic Individuality

In socialist China, a working identity has become integral to the idea of modern Chinese womanhood (J. Liu 2017; Z. Wang 2000; Xie 2021). According to Xie (2021), the working identity of Chinese women is embedded in their anxiety about *suzhi* ('qualities', referring to one's capacities), which they hope to enhance through professional experience and success. F. Liu (2014) revealed the intricacies of Chinese women's shaping of a working identity in the context of 'degendering', whereby women renounce traditional femininity through deliberate masculinisation. It has been argued that professional women in China thus take a masculinised approach to pursuing career success (F. Liu 2019). Some researchers have attributed the degendering phenomenon to the dynamics of Chinese individualisation (Hansen 2015; Yan 2009), a process that enables women to disregard

previously all-encompassing social categories and strive to speak and act independently in both the family and the workplace (Hansen and Pang 2008; Yan 2016).

However, some scholars (e.g., F. Liu 2014; J. Liu 2017; Z. Wang 2000; Yang 2018) have also indicated that since the 1990s, China has seen a revival of traditional gender ethics. According to F. Liu (2014), present-day China is witnessing a trend of (re)gendering or refeminisation—that is, Chinese women are seeking to (re)gender themselves by internalising 'natural' sex differences and reclaiming certain qualities traditionally viewed as 'feminine'. Consequently, qualities traditionally regarded as feminine have been reemphasised, including a focus on domestic responsibilities, child care and harmonious couple relationships (Evans 2010). Xie (2021) argued that submitting to a family-centred lifestyle seems to be an easier choice for Chinese women than competing in a male-dominated career milieu.

The above literature shows that recent research on women's working identity in China has identified two interlocking gendered dimensions of Chinese women's subjectivity. Professional women want to develop a sense of individuality and strive for career independence, but they are simultaneously required to conform to established, traditional gender norms. F. Liu (2014) argued that Chinese women exhibit a dual identity, composed of *female autonomy*, which is related to the Western neoliberal discourse of individualism, and *female dependency*, which is related to the patriarchal discourse on sex roles in China's socialist regime. Similarly, Rofel (2007) characterised Chinese womanhood as a split subjectivity, reflected in the impossibility of becoming a desirable, single, 'free' career woman while also taking on a woman's traditional domestic responsibilities as wife and mother. Xie (2021) further argued that Chinese women's identity split is due to the ideological contradictions of the socialist state; that is, the need to pursue gender equality while participating in China's modern nation-building project.

We argue that the scholarly emphasis on the split subjectivity of modern Chinese womanhood, which highlights women's complicated and often conflicting work–family relationships, has created an enduring image of Chinese women as victims. For example, J. Liu (2007) found that older urban women in China were trapped in time poverty due to tension between work demands and family roles. Xie (2021) argued that the gaze of older family members pressures young working women in China to embody traditional 'wifely' virtues and engage in more emotional labour. According to this image of the woman as a victim, women in China are assumed to be inept, distressed and fragile beings who must meet gender-specific expectations while complying with masculine needs (F. Liu 2006). This bleak image of Chinese womanhood is built on the uncritical presupposition that Chinese women tend to or are forced to accept the 'essentialist' order of gender roles, which not only restricts their agency in domestic and work practices but also perpetuates gender inequalities.

Responding to the *a priori* image in the literature of Chinese women as victims, our study poses two questions. First, *is it reasonable to assume a divided Chinese female subjectivity?* According to some Confucian doctrines, the subjective unity of Chinese womanhood should theoretically be possible, which explains natural sex differences as complementary oppositions—women's particularities are seemingly contradictory but do not necessarily conflict; instead, they may constitute a harmonised, balanced entirety of womanhood (F. Liu 2011). Given this view, exploring the self-formation of Chinese women requires us to discard the binary opposition framework and focus on the potential unity and coordination of Chinese women's cultural, social and political particularities (F. Liu 2014). Second, *does the image of Chinese women as victims exaggerate the passivity of women embedded in a patriarchal but individualising society?* This question is important because private negotiations and public dialogues to advance women's personal interests in present-day China suggest that women can exercise agency even within the constraints of a transformed patriarchal regime (Xie 2021).

This study aims to go beyond the image of female victimhood and the assumption of a split female subjectivity by exploring how Chinese professional women achieve a unified selfhood in their work and domestic commitments. Criticising the binary opposition approach, we coin a new term, 'polyphonic individuality', to capture the complexities of the self-formation of Chinese female professionals. The term 'polyphony' is borrowed from Bakhtin (1984), who initially defined it as 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices' (p. 6). Later, he defined polyphony as 'the event of interaction between autonomous and internally unfinalised consciousnesses' (p. 176). We define a polyphonic individual as someone who endeavours to integrate various elements (such as values, practices, perceptions and actions) into a harmonious process of self-construction. Women as polyphonic individuals engage in the flexible coordination, manipulation and adjustment of their work and family affairs.

The concept of a polyphonic individual resembles that of the 'relational self' (Yan 2017) or social egoist (Feuchtwang 2015) in Chinese culture. Relationships commonly define the Chinese individual; therefore, the Chinese self has been argued to exist within a web of interpersonal relationships based on hierarchical rankings and horizontal differentiation (Fei 1992). Feuchtwang (2015) described this mode of relational being as 'social egoism', meaning that a Chinese individual is a social person who, from birth, belongs to a social microcosm and hierarchically differentiated family and conceives of him- or herself 'as the result of rules of etiquette, rights and conduct' (p. 138). Furthermore, this relational individual is assumed to have a divided self—a small self 'centred on personal desires and interests' and a large self 'bearing the interests of collectivity' (Yan 2016, p. 254). When these two selves contradict each other, the small self must submit to the large self. The problem with the discussion of the idealised Chinese relational self is that the gender dimension is absent; thus, scholars have paid little attention to the role of women's career experience in forming a gendered identity.

Although polyphonic individuality is related to the relational self, social egoism and Chinese individualisation, it is not synonymous with these concepts. The relational self primarily emphasises that the self is constituted through social relationships, but it does not fully explain how individuals actively coordinate competing commitments arising from career, family, gender and personal aspirations. Social egoism draws attention to individuals' mobilisation of family relationships to pursue personal interests, but may place greater emphasis on self-interest than on the coexistence and negotiation of multiple values. Chinese individualisation provides a broader framework for understanding the changing relationship between individuals, families and social institutions. By contrast, polyphonic individuality focuses more specifically on how women reflexively interpret and coordinate multiple, and sometimes contradictory, voices within the self while exercising agency under structural and relational constraints.

Based on data from semi-structured interviews with 16 female doctors working at a private hospital in Shanghai, we discuss how professional women in China construct a polyphonic individuality in terms of their work and family, revealing the enabling and constraining circumstances under which their self-formation occurs. Our guiding research questions are as follows: What are the narratives and practices of these Chinese female doctors in their construction of polyphonic individuality? How do their career experiences and family lives influence their sense of polyphonic selfhood? In the next section, we introduce the hospital setting and our research methods.

3. Research Setting and Methods

We collected data through semi-structured interviews with 16 female doctors working at the same private hospital in Shanghai, which we refer to using the pseudonym 'Shuhe

Hospital'. In 2002, Shanghai's municipal government promulgated the 'System for Introducing Talents' policy, which prompted talented people from around the country to move to Shanghai. Shuhe Hospital has benefited from this policy; most of its medical staff are not local (Shanghainese) people but come from other regions. Shuhe Hospital was established in 2004 and has become one of Shanghai's largest local private hospitals. According to the Chinese hospital classification system, Shuhe Hospital is a level-II, grade-A hospital. The Chinese government ranks medical institutions into three levels from top to bottom: III, II and I. In addition, each level is ranked into three descending grades, A, B and C. As a result, China's public medical institutions enjoy more popularity and privileges than their private counterparts.[1] As a private facility, Shuhe Hospital is not entitled to government grants, but its medical services are covered by national medical insurance; therefore, its patients receive the same reimbursements as they would after treatment at a public hospital.

In this study, which was part of a larger project, we interviewed 16 female doctors at Shuhe Hospital, whom we recruited through snowball sampling. The participants all held medical degrees from medical colleges and universities. Twelve held a bachelor's degree, two held a master's degree, and two held a doctorate. Before moving to Shanghai, the participants had worked in medical institutions of various kinds, including tertiary and secondary hospitals and public and private hospitals. At the time of the study, they worked at Shuhe Hospital in several medical departments, including internal medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, dermatology and paediatrics. The participants were at different career stages, as suggested by their wide age range (31–62). The legal retirement age for women in Chinese public hospitals is 55, but professionals working in private hospitals are exempt from this requirement. Therefore, Shuhe Hospital employs some doctors who are older than the official retirement age. All of the participants but one (divorced) were married. Only one participant reported having no children. Family background information sheds light on how family-related factors (marriage bonds, childcare) may influence professional women's career experience in realising their polyphonic individuality. Table 1 presents the participants' basic information.

Table 1. Information of Interview Participants.

Participants	Specialty	Title	Age	Marital Status	Offspring Number	Education Background	Working City Before Transition	Working Hospital Before Transition
Yuqing	Internal	Chief	62	Y	1	Bachelor	Jilin	Tertiary public
Yuhong	Internal	Associate Chief	45	Y	1	Bachelor	Xinjiang	Tertiary public
Youwen	Internal	Associate Chief	47	Y	1	Master	Jiangxi	Tertiary public
Bingtong	Internal	Attending	53	Y	1	Bachelor	Jiangsu	Tertiary public
Qinlan	Internal	Attending	37	N	1	Bachelor	Jiangsu	Tertiary public
Baige	Internal	Resident	31	Y	1	Bachelor	Anhui	Secondary public
Yinjie	Internal	Attending	35	Y	1	Bachelor	Hunan	Secondary private
Huizhi	TCM	Associate chief	40	Y	0	PhD	Liaoning	Tertiary public
Leyi	Internal	Associate chief	49	Y	1	Master	Fujian	Tertiary public

Table 1. *Cont.*

Participants	Specialty	Title	Age	Marital Status	Offspring Number	Education Back-ground	Working City Before Transition	Working Hospital Before Transition
Nianyang	Internal	Associate chief	51	Y	1	Bachelor	Guizhou	Tertiary public
Fangduo	Dermatology	Attending	40	Y	1	Bachelor	Shandong	Tertiary public
Fangchun	Pediatric	Associate chief	47	Y	1	Bachelor	Henan	Tertiary public
Zhouhuan	Internal	Resident	38	Y	1	Bachelor	Shandong	Secondary public
Liufei	Internal	Associate chief	44	Y	1	PhD	Shandong	Tertiary public
Lilan	Internal	Attending	36	Y	2	Bachelor	Hubei	Tertiary public
Guanjie	Internal	Chief	62	Y	1	Bachelor	Anhui	Tertiary public

We conducted face-to-face interviews in 2015 and 2016. The study was conducted in accordance with Northumbria University's Policy on Ethics in Research. Before the interviews, the participants provided informed consent. They were also asked to complete a form eliciting background information such as their age, marital status, education and job title. The interview outline was semi-structured and subject to modifications and adjustments. The outline contained open-ended questions, such as 'Could you tell me something about your career experience?', 'How do you feel about your current work and why?', 'Why did you move to Shanghai?' and 'How do you manage your family and work commitments?' The interviews were conducted in parts of the hospital that were familiar to the interviewees, such as offices, the foyer and staff rooms. Every interview, which lasted from one to two hours, was recorded using a professional voice recorder with the interviewee's consent. For ethical reasons, pseudonyms are used in this article.

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, and one of the authors (a native Mandarin speaker) transcribed the recordings. Both of the authors translated the interview texts from Chinese into English during the writing process. We used the thematic data analysis method (Creswell 2007) to analyse what was said in the interviews. Using the software package NVivo12, we first conducted an initial open coding of all of the interview data, sentence by sentence, to develop basic themes. Next, the themes related to the research questions were connected to obtain multiple layers of categories. Finally, all of the connected categories were clustered to build a story. Three themes gradually emerged: (1) striving women and gender stereotypes in the workplace; (2) children as a driver of career mobility; and (3) redeploying family relationships to support career development. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

4. Results

4.1. Striving Women and Gender Stereotypes in Work Experience

Work experience played an important role in the female doctors' self-formation of polyphonic individuality. The professional women we interviewed expressed a strong desire for career success and serious concerns about potential job deprivation, both of which were related to gender stereotypes. We focus on two typical gender stereotypes that were linked with the female doctors' narratives of their work experience: one is the 'iron woman' (*nv qiangren*) and the other is the 'stay-at-home woman' (*jiating funv*). Moreover, to capture

these women's career-oriented selves, we use the term 'striving individual' proposed by Yan (2013), referring to someone who is 'industrious, self-disciplined, calculating and pragmatic' and 'driven by the urge to succeed or the fear of failure or the combination of both' (p. 282).[2]

The female doctors' construction of striving individuality in their work experiences was related to the gender stereotype of the iron woman, which they referred to as a striving woman who devotes all of her energy and time to her career, even at the expense of her marital and family life. Assuming that career and family are at opposite ends of a life spectrum constituting polyphonic subjectivity, an iron woman completely inclines towards the career side. Notably, most respondents did not describe themselves as 'iron women', because they valued their family commitments as much as their career achievements. Nevertheless, they emphasised their need for work experience to gain independence, autonomy and self-development. Their desire for career success had driven them to become striving individuals, as embodied in their proactive personalities. For example, the term *haoqiang* (meaning 'eager to excel') was used frequently by some of the informants (n = 8), describing their enterprising spirit and pursuit of career development. For example, before transferring to Shuhe Hospital, Qinlan had served in a public military hospital for several years. She was required to cut her long hair shortly after starting her job, and her skin became heavily tanned because she was engaged in outdoor work all year round. Not only did her body appear masculine, but she also had to behave like a man and adopt an aggressive working style. At the time of her interview, Qinlan had worked at Shuhe Hospital for three years, during which time her work commitments had fully occupied her life. Speaking of her work environment, Qinlan said,

> I am always busy with work. When I go back home, I am too tired to do anything but sleep. As a result, many important things are ignored in my life. It is not easy for me to take care of my family. It's rather stressful to work at a private hospital. I am not a gentle person, but a bit like a manly woman (*nv hanzi*). You must perform like a man when working at such a place.

Qinlan's story demonstrates a dilemma faced by female doctors in China: they may not identify as iron women, but they have to discipline themselves to work hard, 'like a manly woman'. Therefore, they must behave proactively and aggressively to cope with the pressures of work. This point is consistent with F. Liu's (2014) description of the 'defeminisation' or 'masculinisation' of the female self in socialist China, through which Chinese women strive to become autonomous modern citizens.

The masculine, striving disposition of the female doctors interviewed in this study can be attributed to two main factors. The first is the privatisation of the hospital system. As a private hospital lacking state funding, Shuhe Hospital has established a market-oriented and patient-centred service system to attract patients and thereby to support itself financially. To improve medical efficiency, China is pursuing health-service privatisation (Lin 2018). This process is integral to China's path to individualisation, as described by the term *songbang* ('to untie'): the socialist state is 'strategically' retreating from the previously dominant public welfare system and encouraging or even forcing private institutions and individuals to take responsibility for themselves (Yan 2010). Thus, Shuhe Hospital prioritises profit and must carefully calculate, regulate and balance medical costs and benefits. The profit-seeking nature of this medical system emphasises medical staff's one-way obligation to meet customers' (i.e., patients') needs. Doctors' salaries are a function of the number of treated patients—the more patients the hospital treats, the larger its profits and the higher its doctors' salaries. Consequently, female doctors were subjected to high levels of work pressure, to which they responded by behaving in a masculine and proactive fashion, according to Qinlan and her colleagues.

The second chief factor shaping the female doctors' striving disposition was their desire for career advancement. Academic qualifications, particularly at the doctoral level, are key in the Chinese medical environment. For example, Liufei told the following story about pursuing a doctorate:

> Many of my younger colleagues held doctoral or other postgraduate degrees. This situation forced me to consider pursuing further study. [. . .] The environment shapes people. The hospital where I used to work now has a very high recruitment threshold—a doctoral degree has become an essential requirement. You will not be shortlisted if you have only an undergraduate degree.

At the age of 39, Liufei completed her doctorate at a top university in Shanghai. In the following years, she flexibly leveraged regional disparities in the Chinese medical system to upgrade her professional status. Initially, she had the opportunity to work in a grade-A tertiary hospital in Shanghai, but she quickly found that despite her doctoral degree, her age disadvantaged her in competition with younger colleagues. After working at two other hospitals, she returned to her previous employer in Shandong province and was promoted to a senior post. When Shuhe Hospital offered Liufei an even higher post as a departmental director, two years before we interviewed her, she moved to Shanghai.

Several of the interviewees indicated that personal effort was vital to their career advancement. For example, Yuqing identified two sets of personal skills that could affect career promotion—'hard' skills, including academic qualifications, work experience and research output, and 'soft' skills, such as personal relationships (*renqing guanxi*). She argued that 'soft' skills were ineffective unless a person had met all of the 'hard' requirements. As a senior physician who had been promoted to the role of chief medical officer several years earlier, Yuqing was ahead of her cohort. She attributed this success to her competitive personality: 'I am eager to do well in everything and struggle to become number one in every aspect of work. I always urge myself not to be outdone'.

In ascribing their professional successes to their proactive behaviour and dedicated efforts, the interviewees acknowledged that they strived for career recognition and wished to gain independence in the workplace. This finding contrasts with another gender stereotype mentioned by the interviewees—the 'stay-at-home woman', which refers to a woman who has no career and devotes all of her energy and time to family commitments. Studies have revealed that Chinese women deem this role unacceptable (J. Liu 2017), as they believe that dropping out of the labour market reduces their value as professional women (Xie 2021). This argument is consistent with the narratives of the interviewed doctors, who regarded the 'stay-at-home woman' as a derogatory stereotype that described a woman with no work and no income, dependent on her male breadwinning partner. Although the female doctors refused to identify themselves as iron women, because they valued family life, they were also reluctant to label themselves as stay-at-home women, as they acknowledged the value of work. They were confident in their ability to perform as well as men in their careers. Some interviewees even cited the socialist slogan 'women hold up half the sky', which has been popular since the Mao era. Moreover, they believed that stable careers would bring them good salaries and guarantee their independence and equal status in their family relationships. Lilan said,

> I must make money on my own. I must become a financially independent woman to feel safe. [. . .] My husband wanted me to be a stay-at-home woman, but I disagreed. I am a person who lacks a sense of security, so I must have a job. I need at least enough financial autonomy to support my child and myself on a day-to-day basis.

Having a career not only offers financial independence but also drives a sense of personal autonomy. The interviewees expressed this idea as follows: 'Only with financial independence can a woman achieve personal autonomy' (Leyi); 'I can rely on myself now, without having to turn to other people' (Bingtong); 'Self-help is better than help from others' (Huizhi); and 'A woman must be independent, because only independence can ensure her freedom and power in family and society' (Guanjie). These quotations suggest that having paid employment has become an integral part of modern Chinese womanhood (Xie 2021).

4.2. Career Mobility Driven by Children's Education: Fangchun's Case

Family relationships influenced the female doctors' professional experience and their formation of polyphonic individuality in two ways. First, family-related factors, especially children's education, drove the interviewees' career mobility. Second, the interviewees reflexively reappropriated relationships with their extended family members and spouses to support their career development. These two ways suggest that the meaning of family and its functional approach are individualised in professional women's concerted efforts to balance work and family commitments. We discuss the first aspect in this section, using the story of one female doctor as a case study, and the second aspect in the next section.

The family's role in forming the female doctors' polyphonic individuality was reflected in their career mobility. All interviewees reported having experienced career mobility by moving across the country to pursue their career goals. We define 'career mobility' as a movement initiated by one's desire for job transfer; it is not merely relevant to occupational changes but is also associated with the family network, hospital hierarchy and social inequalities. We consider societal factors in the discussion of career mobility insofar as they are involved in the formation of female doctors' polyphonic individuality.

Fangchun's career experience perfectly exemplifies the influence of family factors on career mobility. Fangchun graduated from a medical college in her hometown in Henan province and worked for several years in a local public hospital, where she was appointed director of paediatrics. In 2008, however, she began to worry about her daughter's education and decided to resign and move to Shanghai. This was not an easy decision. She acknowledged that her husband opposed her decision in the beginning. 'My husband didn't really want me to move to Shanghai at that time', Fangchun recalled. 'He enjoyed life in our hometown very much. Also, both of our parents live in our hometown, and he thought it would be easier to take care of them if I were there'. Fangchun's parents also discouraged her from moving because of Shanghai's overpriced housing market.

Despite these difficulties and resistance, Fangchun prioritised her child's education and moved from her hometown to Shanghai. Rejecting her husband and parents' opinions, she made an independent decision to make this bold move after carefully considering her daughter's comments. 'I asked my daughter for her opinion', Fangchun said. 'She responded without hesitation that she wanted to go to Shanghai. Her reaction was perhaps the most crucial factor that drove me to decide to leave'. To understand this resolute action, we should consider the regional educational inequalities in China. As Fangchun indicated, Shanghai has more advanced educational resources and better *suzhi* education than her hometown in Henan. She believed that Shanghai was one of the cities that had most successfully implemented the *suzhi* education reform, whereas education in Henan remained examination-oriented. She hoped that moving to Shanghai would provide her daughter with top-tier educational resources, expose her to various interests and improve her all-around capabilities. In contrast, she characterised Henan as occupying a lower educational level. More importantly, the hospital in Shanghai promised to sponsor Fangchun's application for permanent residency (*hukou*), the institutional precondition for children to participate in the *gaokao* (college entrance examination) in Shanghai, which is difficult for

Shanghai's millions of migrants to acquire. Hence, we argue that the uneven distribution of educational resources among China's regions is a social driver of women's career mobility, as evidenced by Fangchun's story of centring her career on her child's education.

Interestingly, Fangchun interpreted her regional mobility as an 'upward' move, as it elevated her daughter to a better educational system. However, she admitted that the job change caused a 'downward' shift in her professional status, as her current employer in Shanghai is a private hospital that provides secondary care, whereas her previous employer, a public hospital in Henan, was categorised as grade A and provided tertiary care. As noted above, China's tertiary hospitals provide higher-quality medical treatment than its secondary hospitals, and public hospitals are considered superior to private hospitals. Moreover, Fangchun indicated that she had headed a ward and led a research project at the Henan hospital, but these opportunities were unavailable at the Shanghai hospital, restricting her professional development. Thus, we indicate that Fangchun's pursuit of career mobility in the interest of her child's education highlights her autonomy in making the decision to move but complicates her polyphonic individuality by compromising her career development because of her child's needs.

Fangchun's story is not an isolated one. Most of the interviewees (n = 15) reported making trade-offs between career development and their children's education. Fangchun's account further revealed how motherhood changed her subjective understanding of work and family. Her case demonstrates that regional inequalities in educational resources can complicate professional women's subjective rankings of family and career. Fangchun acknowledged that the birth of her daughter had fundamentally changed her understanding of the value of work and family and reshaped the self-formation of her polyphonic individuality. Before her daughter was born, Fangchun identified as a typical professional woman devoted to pursuing her career. She even planned to obtain a postgraduate degree. However, her daughter's birth altered her plans. Not only did she suspend her postgraduate study plan, but her life compass and sense of meaning in work also changed. 'I couldn't live without my child. I couldn't leave her alone', Fangchun said, implying that being with her daughter outweighed her desire for career development. 'I work for my child', she added. 'It doesn't make sense to merely work while neglecting my child's growth'.

4.3. Redeploying Family Relationships to Support Career Development

The female doctors interviewed in this study described two aspects of redeploying their family relationships to support their career development: one with extended family members and one with spouses.

First, the female doctors redeployed their relationships with extended family members to support their personal career development. For example, it was common for a doctor to invite her mother or mother-in-law (*popo*) to live in her house and care for her child so that she could work. This corporate family model, as revealed by other studies (Kang 2012; Qi 2016; D. Wang 2010), echoes Baige's story. After the birth of Baige's son, her mother-in-law moved to Shanghai to live with Baige's small family. Owing to her mother-in-law's continuous contribution to childcare and housework, Baige was able to devote increased effort to developing her career and balancing her work and family commitments.

Another example is Yuhong, who worked for several years at a hospital affiliated with a state-owned enterprise in Xinjiang before moving to Shanghai. She once asked her mother-in-law to help look after her young daughter while she was away on a job transfer. 'It was a really difficult time', she recalled. 'The new workplace was too far away from home, and the traffic was terrible. I was so grateful to my mother-in-law for her childcare help that I had no worries about family and even received a career promotion later'.

Second, the marital relationship was redeployed by the interviewed female doctors to support their career development. Some of the participants reported that they often negotiated the allocation of domestic responsibilities with their partners. This negotiation practice offered the women a chance to increase their independence in family life and gain time to develop their careers. For example, Nianyang mentioned that her husband was a family-oriented person with a sense of responsibility for domestic chores. Therefore, she often negotiated with him about household chores so that she could concentrate on her work, achieve financial independence and feel 'confident and empowered' (*you diqi*).

The interviewees also challenged the traditional belief that women should remain at home and look after children. Qinlan stressed the imperative of higher education and career development for women to increase their independence in family life. Similarly, Yuqing emphasised that modern women should no longer consider the family as their only source of self-worth but instead should enter the workplace to develop their careers.

Notably, everyday negotiations worked to reshape the roles of the doctors' husbands. Housework, which was traditionally classified as the domestic responsibility of wives and mothers, was increasingly undertaken by husbands and fathers. Yinjie described the support provided by her husband:

> My husband offers lots of support for my career. I am always busy with work and don't have much time to do housework. He does not complain. Since our son was born, my partner has taken over most of the domestic responsibilities, such as feeding and bathing the baby, changing his nappies and reading him stories.

Huizhi's experience provided another example of a husband assuming greater domestic responsibility to support his wife's career. Huizhi met her husband Mingli at medical school. She continued to study after they married, earning a doctorate. After several career promotions, she became extremely busy and had no time to do household chores. Therefore, Mingli assumed most of the domestic responsibilities to support Huizhi's career. Huizhi said that Mingli was less ambitious than she was and that he was always willing to contribute to family life. Using the rhetoric of complementary gender roles, she said, 'I think the ideal marriage is that both sides are complementary. If both pursue their careers, who will look after the family?'

Overall, the interviewees redeployed their relationships with extended family members and spouses in different ways to support their career development. Extended family members provided childcare and domestic assistance, while negotiations with spouses enabled some of the women to redistribute domestic responsibilities and devote more time to their careers.

5. Discussion

5.1. Striving Individuality and Gendered Career Agency

Overall, our findings suggest that the intensive work environment of China's market-oriented private hospitals forces female doctors to exhibit enterprising, masculine behaviour in their quests for career development, financial independence and personal autonomy. In ascribing their professional successes to their proactive behaviour and dedicated efforts, the interviewees acknowledged that they strived for career recognition and wished to gain independence in the workplace. Studies have revealed that Chinese women deem the role of the "stay-at-home woman" unacceptable (J. Liu 2017), as they believe that dropping out of the labour market reduces their value as professional women (Xie 2021). Consistent with these studies, the interviewed doctors valued paid employment as an important source of financial independence and personal autonomy.

The Chinese female doctors' working experiences are also consistent with those of their Western counterparts. As Wajcman (1998) argued, female professionals in Western societies must "conform to the male model of working life in order to succeed" and adopt "masculine patterns of (non)participation in the household" (p. 41). Accordingly, the growing demands of working life and the masculine behaviour required of female doctors may result in the development of an internalised self; that is, of polyphonic individuality.

The female doctors' polyphonic individuality lies on a spectrum, with "iron women" and "stay-at-home women" at the two extremes, and they refuse to be reduced to either of them. With the development of individualisation in China, these career-oriented women may bear the double burden of "bringing home the bacon" and assuming responsibility for housework and childcare, making them "more likely to experience intense friction between the demands of career and family life" (Wajcman 2015, p. 73). Nevertheless, the interviewees did not simply present themselves as victims of this tension. Instead, their accounts demonstrated their agency in pursuing career development and financial independence while continuing to value their family lives. Their striving individuality therefore formed one important dimension of their polyphonic individuality.

This interpretation can be further developed by drawing on studies of Chinese 'left-over women', or *shengnv*, which similarly reveal how career-oriented women negotiate competing expectations surrounding career, marriage and family life. To (2013) indicated that *shengnv* must cope with their parents' traditional views on their marital choices, which conflict with their own 'modern' emphasis on pursuing economic achievement. In the same vein, a more recent study (Gui 2020) revealed that although these career-oriented women are forced to co-exist with different value systems and social expectations, they demonstrate excellence both at work and in the family.

5.2. Coordinating Career and Motherhood

Fangchun's story was not an isolated one. Most of the interviewees reported making trade-offs between career development and their children's education. According to previous studies, women are more likely than men to change career paths when it is difficult to achieve a work–family balance; they do so by postponing promotions, otherwise suppressing the desire for career advancement or even leaving their jobs (F. Liu 2014; Xie 2021). Consistent with these studies, Fangchun's decision to move to Shanghai improved her daughter's educational opportunities but resulted in a downward shift in her own professional status.

Nevertheless, Fangchun's decision should not be understood simply as a passive sacrifice of her career for her child. Her pursuit of career mobility in the interest of her child's education highlighted her autonomy in making the decision to move, while simultaneously complicating her polyphonic individuality by compromising her career development because of her child's needs. Fangchun internally adjusted to her family–work imbalance by integrating the family and career dimensions into a polyphonic individual self.

When a woman has a child, her gendered identity is subject to dramatic changes as she shapes her motherhood, even at the cost of her career aspirations (Gui 2020; J. Liu 2017). In tandem with this observation, it has been found that mothers rather than fathers play a major role in managing children's education, which reflects their constructed motherhood (Hansen 2015; Yang 2018). Accordingly, in line with the cultural ideal of intensive mothering, women are expected to 'sacrifice careers, leisure time, and whatever else is necessary to ensure that their children thrive' (Wajcman 2015, p. 69).

Hence, the conceptual framing of polyphonic individuality acknowledges working women's family–career conflict, which is rooted in an entrenched patriarchal culture that

expects women to take on more domestic responsibilities than their male partners. However, it also draws attention to how women reflexively interpret and coordinate these competing commitments. Fangchun did not entirely abandon either her career or motherhood. Instead, she reconstructed the meaning of work, career mobility and personal development around her relationship with her daughter. Her experience therefore demonstrates how career and motherhood can be coordinated within a polyphonic individual self, even when this coordination involves professional compromises.

5.3. Relational Support and Polyphonic Individuality

Family relationships have been redefined by the dynamics of individualisation in post-Mao China, implying that the individual has become the major actor in the family network to protect his or her personal interests, happiness and welfare (Yan 2009). Scholars have also indicated that the process of Chinese individualisation is accompanied by the rise of a new familialism, creating a new family identity for Chinese individuals who endeavour to balance their family and personal interests (Kang 2012; Yan 2021). This new familialism contrasts with traditional familialism, which asserts the primacy of family interests over individual interests and demands individuals' unconditional sacrifice and devotion to the family (Yan 2021). As Qi (2016) clarified, it is misleading to argue that family bonds and obligations in China are diminishing in importance; rather, they remain strong, but their meanings have undergone reinterpretation, renegotiation and modification through intergenerational interactions.

The support provided by the interviewees' mothers and mothers-in-law illustrates this changing function of family relationships. This corporate family model has also been revealed by other studies (Kang 2012; Qi 2016; D. Wang 2010). In the cases of Baige and Yuhong, intergenerational family support enabled the women to devote increased effort to their careers while continuing to fulfil their family commitments. Family relationships therefore remained important, but they were reflexively redeployed to support the women's individual career development.

In some cases, the professional women played a lead role in addressing domestic responsibilities, whereas their mothers or mothers-in-law played a supplementary role. This practice is in line with Xiao's (2016) description of an emerging intergenerational parenting coalition, in which mothers act as powerful childrearing 'project managers' while grandparents serve as caretakers who are marginalised in the family's power relations. This inverted intergenerational power hierarchy suggests that Chinese women, as mothers, have gained power in family life. Concomitantly, they tend not to sacrifice their personal interests and career development when balancing work and family issues.

The interviewees' negotiations with their husbands provide further evidence of the changing meaning and function of family relationships. A negotiated spousal relationship that stresses equality, respect and autonomy (Qi 2016; Yan 2021) empowers professional women to challenge the traditional gender expectation of 'women inside the home, men outside' and break down the gender stereotypes of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Qinlan's and Yuqing's accounts illustrated this point by emphasising women's higher education, career development and financial independence as important sources of self-worth.

Husbands' increased engagement in household chores and support for their wives' career development testify to the rise of women as polyphonic individuals in coordinating career and family commitments. Chinese husbands participate more than they once did in domestic life, which was conventionally defined as women's 'inside' domain (Kang 2012; Yan 2021). This change in Chinese manhood (F. Liu 2019) may be conducive to women's career development, which is commonly seen as men's 'outside' domain. These dual

changes in gender roles may have the potential to alter the stereotypical images of women as homemakers and men as breadwinners.

This exchange of gender roles also demonstrates the complementarity between husband and wife, which is recognised as the essence of an ideal Chinese marriage (Rosenlee 2006). Rosenlee (2006) contended that the gender-based division of labour should be replaced by an alternative model based on merit and moral authority to empower wives to challenge gender essentialism concerning the private/inside sphere and gain the competence to participate in the public/outside sphere. Huizhi and Mingli's arrangement illustrates this complementarity: Mingli assumed greater domestic responsibility as Huizhi's career progressed, enabling her to continue her professional development.

In summary, the interviewees reflexively redeployed their relationships with extended family members and spouses to support their career development. Our findings suggest that family relationships remain meaningful in professional women's formation of polyphonic selfhood, but that their functional approach has become more individually oriented (see Yan 2009, 2010, 2016). The division of labour in Chinese family life is also shifting away from entrenched gender essentialism, as gender roles are constantly renegotiated according to women's and their families' actual life situations. Relational support does not therefore contradict individualisation. Instead, it enables professional women to coordinate career ambitions, motherhood and family obligations within their polyphonic individuality.

6. Conclusions

A large body of literature (F. Liu 2014; J. Liu 2017; Rofel 2007; D. Wang 2010; Xie 2021; Yan 2021) has demonstrated that Chinese women have formulated a self-contradictory or split subjectivity due to conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, they express an explicit desire for financial independence, individual autonomy and egalitarian gender relationships. On the other hand, they still seek to conform to some traditional gender norms to fulfil their domestic responsibilities. We acknowledge this intrinsic tension of Chinese womanhood but disagree with the bleak image of women as victims that results, arguing that current scholarship has either exaggerated women's initiative or undervalued their agency.

Hence, we propose a framework of 'polyphonic individuality' to describe professional women's multidimensional and multifaceted self-formation in China. We emphasise two interlinked points in this novel framing. First, female professionals are rising as *individuals* who strive for personal autonomy and career development, rather than as representatives of a collective unit (e.g., the family). Second, female professionals seek to embed self-formation in the *joint domains of work and family* rather than emphasising one at the expense of the other. The construction of polyphonic individuality reflects female workers' agency and flexibility in coordinating paid work and domestic responsibilities. Given this reality, we argue that the female doctors interviewed in this study exhibited a concerted and adaptive subjectivity. Despite the undesirable influence of family elements, particularly children's education, on their career mobility, a closer examination of their subjective interpretations of work–family conflict revealed a polyphonic self-conception that incorporated work and family commitments into an integral sense of the individual self. They also leveraged family relationships with their parents, especially their in-laws and spouses, to support their career development. Recognising the implications of the 'relational self' (Yan 2017) and 'social egoism' (Feuchtwang 2015), as described earlier in this study, for the conceptualisation of polyphonic individuality, we argue that a polyphonic individual flexibly coordinates and adjusts behaviours, perceptions and mentalities according to their actual life situations. In other words, a polyphonic woman may sometimes prioritise career development over family interests and vice versa, depending on her concrete, practical circumstances.

The concept of polyphonic individuality offers an alternative lens through which to revisit the dilemma faced by professional women in China. Acknowledging the double burden of Chinese female professionals, this framework shifts the focus from a passive, laborious and constrained female profile to women's active, concerted and versatile practices in addressing work–family conflict. Accordingly, subsequent research should devote increased attention to women's subjective interpretations, perceptions and actions regarding career, family, the self and gender.

More broadly, the concept of polyphonic individuality not only applies to professional women in China but may also contribute new explanations for working women beyond the Chinese context. In Western countries, the public/private sphere and male/female dichotomies are intertwined, resulting in more female full-time workers entering the labour force, even though 'rigid gender role segregation still exists' (Gui 2020, p. 1972). For this reason, we should not underestimate the restrictive influences on professional women's formation of polyphonic individuality in China and Western societies. One limitation of our study is that it does not discuss the role of the socialist state in professional women's shaping of their polyphonic individuality. The Chinese state considers the refashioning of Chinese womanhood as a strategy for rapid modernisation and thus plays a key role in Chinese women's self-formation. This topic requires follow-up studies.

Beyond China, polyphonic individuality may also offer a useful analytical lens for examining professional women's experiences in societies where individual aspirations coexist with strong familial obligations, patriarchal gender norms or unequal caring responsibilities. However, the specific voices incorporated into the self, and the ways in which women coordinate them, are likely to vary across cultural and institutional contexts. Comparative research is therefore needed to examine the applicability and limitations of polyphonic individuality in different societies.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.W. and S.W.; methodology, S.W.; software, S.W.; validation, S.W.; formal analysis, C.W.; investigation, S.W.; writing—original draft preparation, C.W. and S.W.; writing—review and editing, S.W. and C.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study is based on the author's doctoral research. It was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and ethical approval was granted by the research ethics committee at Northumbria University during the first half of 2017.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Acknowledgments: This article draws on research undertaken as part of Shuo Wang's doctoral thesis. She is deeply grateful to her principal supervisor, John Blenkinsopp, for his invaluable guidance, thoughtful feedback, and generous support throughout her doctoral studies. His intellectual encouragement contributed greatly to the development of this work. For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] In 2019, although the number of private hospitals in China (22,424) was approximately twice that of public hospitals (11,930), public hospitals had 4,975,633 beds, whereas private hospitals had 1,890,913 beds. Moreover, public hospitals saw 2.89 billion visits in the same year, far exceeding the 520 million visits to private hospitals. See https://www.nhc.gov.cn/guihuaxxs/c100136/202006/e6e4316bcfcd4b689fec2e81cfba49a5.shtml (accessed on 8 February 2026).

[2] It is important to compare the Chinese 'striving individual' with his or her Western counterpart, the 'enterprising self' (Rose 1996). Both terms imply a self-driven, foresighted and determined individual who wishes to pursue an independent career and path in life. However, whereas the Chinese striving individual must cope with the 'entanglement of the traditional, communist and individualistic moralities' and attempts to balance conflicting behavioural patterns in practice (Yan 2013, p. 278), the Western enterprising self is based on the premise of individual natural rights, including autonomy, freedom, choice and liberty (Yan 2012).

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