

CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF SUCCESSION:
CONFUCIAN INFLUENCES ON WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP IN CHINESE FAMILY SMES

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

This research examines how Confucian values—such as family loyalty, respect for hierarchy, and collective harmony are represented in print and media portrayals of women in leadership roles within Chinese family-owned small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It looks at whether these values are framed as barriers that reinforce traditional gender roles or as enablers of women’s leadership in business. While research in Confucian societies has expanded, existing studies primarily address economic barriers (e.g., income disparities, limited business opportunities) and structural constraints (e.g., legal restrictions, family expectations), with comparatively little focus on the role of media in shaping public perceptions of female business leadership. This dissertation uses thematic analysis of five purposively selected media cases, chosen for their relevance to gendered leadership succession in Chinese family-owned SMEs. Cases were selected from an initial pool of 50 based on three key criteria: (1) SME family ownership, where family dynamics significantly influenced decision-making; (2) female leadership, with women occupying key leadership or decision-making roles; and (3) cultural alignment, where businesses demonstrated Confucian values such as family loyalty and respect for hierarchy. The cases were drawn from newspapers, publications, and reports published between 2015 and 2025, a period marked by shifts in succession norms following the end of China’s one-child policy. NVivo was used to identify recurring and culturally significant themes across the selected cases.

The analysis of five media cases shows seven recurring themes across the cases: sacrificial succession, quiet leadership, financial entry, emotional labour, earned trust, conditional acceptance, and quiet exit or resistance. These themes suggest that daughters' succession was rarely granted by default but instead negotiated through culturally embedded acts of duty, deference, and quiet perseverance. These findings contribute to the literature by challenging simplified interpretations of daughters' roles in succession and highlighting how Confucian values are negotiated, rather than passively reproduced, in media portrayals of women's leadership.

Keywords: Confucian Values, Family-owned SMEs, Succession Planning, Media Narratives

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Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Confucianism	A Chinese philosophy emphasising duty, hierarchy, and harmony, shaping gender roles and family business norms.
Filial Piety	Respect and responsibility toward one's parents and elders; central to family expectations in Chinese culture.
Guanxi	Personal networks and reciprocal ties used to build trust and conduct business in China.
Mianzi (Face)	"Face" or social reputation; preserving dignity is key in Chinese personal and professional life.
Shengnu	"Leftover woman;" a term for unmarried women over a certain age, reinforcing traditional gender norms.
Succession	The transfer of leadership within a family business, often across generations. In Confucian contexts, this process is shaped by gendered expectations, filial duty, and hierarchical dynamics.

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Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Daughters in Chinese family firms remain largely overlooked as successors, despite growing policy efforts and shifting family dynamics that demand their inclusion. This research explores how inherited norms, cultural expectations, and public narratives intersect to shape female leadership succession in Chinese family-owned SMEs. More than 90% of China's private enterprises are family-owned (Erchi & Wei, 2023), playing a significant role in the national economy and intergenerational wealth transfer. Private firms contribute approximately 60% of China's GDP, 70% of its innovative capacity, 80% of urban employment, and 90% of new jobs (Cunningham, 2022). Between 2017 and 2022, three-fourths of these firms experienced leadership transitions—representing the most extensive generational handover in the country's private sector history (Erchi & Wei, 2023). This generational shift has brought longstanding gendered assumptions into sharper focus, especially within Confucian-influenced family firms. While some scholars interpret these transitions as signs of gradual gender progress, others caution that increased visibility of daughters may remain symbolic rather than systemic, with authority still concentrated among senior male family members.

Alongside their economic importance, small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) have also become sites of growing female entrepreneurial participation. In China, SMEs—defined as businesses with fewer than 1,000 employees and annual revenue below NZD 80 million (Small Business Council NZ, 2019)—have played a significant role in the country's transition from a state-controlled to a market-driven economy (Franzke et al., 2022). This economic transformation has coincided with broader social changes, including an increase in the participation of women in entrepreneurship. By 2017, women-owned enterprises accounted for 31% of all SMEs in China, and women were starting new businesses at higher rates than men (Tanaka & Sloane, 2018). Yet these gains coexist with enduring structural and cultural disparities. Women in China earn on average 28.43% less than men (Bai et al., 2022) and continue to face barriers to decision-making, and access to capital (Debroux, 2010).

However, structural shifts in family composition have also played a role in shaping succession dynamics—particularly following significant policy changes. Demographic shifts, particularly following the end of the one-child policy in 2015, have further impacted gender

roles within family-owned businesses. In families with no male heirs, daughters are increasingly stepping into leadership roles, prompting a reconsideration of traditional views on inheritance and authority. National initiatives such as the “*Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2011–2020)*”—a policy framework issued by China’s State Council—have explicitly encouraged the “cultivation of female entrepreneurial talent” and supported women’s participation in “economic decision-making and enterprise management” (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2011, p.9). However, these formal initiatives often clash with deep-rooted Confucian beliefs about male leadership, family duty, and filial piety. As Barnes (2007) argues, policy reforms alone are insufficient to shift deeply rooted beliefs passed through generations of family and social practice, particularly in contexts where emotional ties and inherited expectations often outweigh formal change.

Succession is often viewed as a straightforward transfer of authority, but in this study, it emerges as a gradual and emotionally layered process — one that is shaped by culture, expectations, and silence as much as by structure. Succession in these firms rarely unfolds through clear, institutionalised plans—particularly for daughters, relying instead on informal negotiation of authority within family hierarchies (Mustafa et al., 2019; Cooke & Xiao, 2020). Media portrayals add a powerful layer to this cultural landscape. A large-scale content analysis conducted by UNICEF and the United Nations Women commissioned a report on gender representation from over 5,000 Chinese advertisements (2019–2022) across television, online video platforms, and social media. The study found that women were twice as likely to be depicted in domestic roles (44.0%) as in paid occupations (25.9%) and appeared as leaders in only 1.5% of cases, compared with 2.8% for men (Manwei, 2025). These representations do more than mirror norms; they actively shape perceptions of who belongs in leadership. For daughters raised in Confucian households, the lack of visible female leaders influences both how the public views women’s leadership potential and how daughters perceive their capacity to lead. These visuals contribute to the perception that leadership is more associated with traditionally masculine traits—public authority, assertiveness, and emotional detachment—traits that often conflict with how daughters are raised to see themselves. As a result, even capable and committed female successors may experience an invisible threshold between contribution and recognition. While existing studies have examined daughters’ marginalisation within family decision-making structures, few have explored how public narratives in media shape internalised leadership identities.

This research offers a different lens by analysing media representation of real-world succession cases to understand better how cultural and visual cues reinforce or undermine daughters' leadership pathways.

1.2 Research Aim

Despite growing interest in the business practices of Chinese women, little is known about how daughters in family-owned SMEs navigate succession, especially while contending with Confucian pressures and a lack of public visibility. Existing studies often focus on structural constraints like patrilineal inheritance or exclusion from decision-making networks such as *guanxi*. However, these perspectives frequently overlook the daily negotiations, emotional labour, and strategic positioning women undertake within their family firms. Even fewer studies examine how daughters are represented in the media and how those portrayals shape public perceptions of their leadership. To guide this, the research asks:

How are daughters in Chinese family-owned SMEs navigating Confucian gender norms in leadership succession, and how are these experiences represented in Chinese media?

By analysing media portrayals of real-world succession cases, the study explores how female successors internalise, challenge, or adapt to cultural expectations while contending with public representations that may reinforce or destabilise their leadership roles. Past research often sees daughters' leadership as either a rare exception to tradition or as simply going along with it. This research shows that their roles are more complex — actively negotiated and shaped in ways that do not fully fit either label. The findings aim to inform both academic theory and practical approaches to gender-inclusive succession planning in Confucian-influenced contexts. For HR professionals and family firms, these insights offer culturally grounded strategies to support female leadership development in succession scenarios. This topic matters now more than ever, as China's aging founder generation prepares to hand over control to successors in a context where gender equity, business continuity, and cultural tradition are increasingly in tension.

Through a qualitative thematic analysis of media cases drawn from secondary press and academic sources, the study reveals how inherited Confucian values, emotional labour, and

narratives interact to shape the portrayal of daughters' leadership experiences. The chapters that follow build this investigation in stages. Chapter 2 reviews literature on Confucian gender roles, female entrepreneurship, and succession. Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methodology and case selection process of the five profiles. Chapter 4 presents narrative findings from five cases, and Chapter 5 presents key themes analysed from the secondary data. Chapter 6 draws connections between media portrayals and succession dynamics and finally concludes with implications and future research.

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews existing literature on Confucian values, gender norms, and leadership in Chinese family-owned SMEs. It is organised into seven key sections: (1) Confucian values and gender expectations, (2) the one-child policy, (3) push & pull motivational drivers, (4) gatekeeping in family succession, (5) quiet leadership, (6) the silent exit phenomenon, and (7) media narratives of female leadership. Together, these strands examine how tradition, policy, and public stories influence whether daughters are seen—and accepted—as leaders in their family firms. The chapter also identifies ongoing theoretical tensions and outlines how this study responds through a thematic analysis of case studies. This literature review draws on a cultural-feminist lens, highlighting how daughters in Chinese family-owned SMEs navigate gendered power structures not through overt confrontation but through relational leadership, emotional labour, and symbolic negotiation.

2.2 Confucian Values and Gender Expectations

Confucianism, developed by the philosopher Confucius over 2,500 years ago, emphasises hierarchical order, filial piety, and collective harmony. It continues to shape social and business life in China, particularly in family-run SMEs where filial piety, hierarchy, and harmony remain central (Shan & Tian, 2022). Within this value system, women are expected to support male authority through emotional labour, managing family tensions, maintaining harmony, and demonstrating filial piety (Chen et al., 2017).

This gendered role is further reinforced by societal narratives, such as the concept of shengnu ‘leftover women’ applied to unmarried urban women over a certain age, which reinforces the idea that women's primary value lies in marriage, not enterprise (Merriman, 2015). For some daughters, staying in the family business becomes both a form of retreat from a hostile marriage market and an attempt to reclaim social worth through filial contribution. These roles are rarely recognised as leadership, but they are essential for keeping the family and business functioning smoothly. These responsibilities include managing family disputes, negotiating between generations, serving as the emotional anchor

of the business, ensuring smooth internal operations, and making sacrifices for the sake of harmony.

While legal reforms such as the 1982 Constitution (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2020) and 1992 Law on the Protection of Women's Rights (Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, 2023) formally affirm gender equality, deeply rooted cultural expectations continue to define women's place as morally rather than professionally central. Some daughters reinterpret these roles not to challenge tradition directly, but to frame leadership as an extension of filial duty (Xian et al., 2020). This approach lets daughters influence change while preserving family harmony and avoiding confrontation. Some feminist scholars argue this reinforces patriarchal norms and limits women's autonomy (Kandiyoti, 1988); others interpret it as a culturally strategic adaptation that enables daughters to wield influence within relational norms (Xian et al., 2020). This divide reflects two contrasting views: one sees these actions as reinforcing patriarchy, while the other sees them as culturally rooted strategies that allow women to lead within traditional norms. For many daughters, stepping into a leadership role is not about challenging tradition, but fulfilling it. This suggests that daughters can honour tradition while still exercising leadership, even if it is not consistently recognised as such. This highlights how daughters' roles go beyond simple labels like obedience or rebellion, revealing dimensions that many studies still overlook.

While Confucian values defined the hierarchy of family roles, China's one-child policy redefined who was expected to occupy them, particularly when no sons were present. The following section examines how this demographic shift reconfigured filial expectations, gendered responsibility, and the role of daughters in family-owned enterprises. However, most literature focuses on formal authority, such as job titles and ownership stakes, while neglecting the emotional work required for women to be seen as credible. Instead, this study examines how daughters perform leadership through emotional labour and silent influence practices, often overlooked in traditional analyses of succession.

2.3 The One-Child Policy

The primary aim of China's one-child policy (1979–2015) was not to empower women but to promote modernisation by reducing the number of people competing for

resources, both within families and at a national level (Asia Pacific Curriculum, 2019). The policy left a complex legacy for only daughters. Fong (2002) and Greenhalgh (2003) specifically highlight how, in urban contexts where the policy was strictly enforced, families invested heavily in their only daughters, expecting them to succeed academically and economically. This shift altered gendered expectations for urban, educated women. In rural areas, however, exceptions to the policy—such as allowing a second child if the first was a girl—meant many families still had sons, and patrilineal traditions persisted more strongly. Sons were still expected to carry the family name, inherit property, and care for aging parents (Asia Pacific Curriculum, 2019).

Despite regional differences, the one-child policy unintentionally disrupted traditional male-preference succession patterns. “The rise of these powerful daughters is set against a traditional Chinese preference for sons to take over businesses. A lot of these founders only have one child, who is the daughter,” explains Li Haitao, Director of the Family Business Research Centre at Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business (Flannery, 2021, p. 1). As a result, many families now prepare daughters to lead despite longstanding cultural preferences for male heirs. This demographic shift has brought about noticeable changes in succession strategies, especially among SMEs, where family continuity is highly valued. However, this empowerment sat uneasily alongside lingering cultural beliefs that women are primarily caregivers, not business heirs. Sibling dynamics remain underexplored, despite their subtle yet significant influence over leadership succession. In families with only daughters, the role of successor may seem inevitable; in those with multiple children, rivalry or assumptions about competence can create tension (Yan & Sorenson, 2006). These unspoken hierarchies—shaped by factors such as birth order, gender, and emotional proximity to the business—are rarely documented in formal succession plans but often influence crucial decisions regarding leadership transition, timing, and emotional responsibilities (Xian et al., 2020).

Under the one-child policy, sons were not only preferred but often groomed from birth to embody specific Confucian ideals—carrying the family name, inheriting assets, and assuming leadership roles within both the household and family business (Yan & Sorenson, 2006). This cultural investment positioned male children as default successors, granting them timely access to decision-making authority and resources within family firms (Chen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, this inherited authority was seldom open to negotiation. Many only sons

were expected to prioritise continuity over personal ambitions, leading the business regardless of their interest, competence, or entrepreneurial spirit (Fong, 2002). This cultural logic that excluded daughters from early succession planning also confined sons within rigid expectations of masculinity, responsibility, and performance (Xian et al., 2020). Family entrepreneurship is not about excluding women; it also demonstrates how inclusion can bring pressure to conform to traditional expectations, mainly when these are rooted in tradition rather than choice (Kandiyoti, 1988; Franzke et al., 2022).

Chen et al. (2017) found that many daughters took on leadership responsibilities out of duty, yet often without full recognition or control. For only daughters, this role can feel both empowering and limiting, driven to succeed to honour the family name, yet held back by deeply rooted ideas about what is considered respectable for women. As the sole child, many daughters are expected to take on the responsibilities a son might have had, creating both opportunities and pressure, especially in family businesses where legacy and reputation carry weight. These mixed emotions of duty, hesitation, pride, and constraint are rarely conveyed in research that focuses on gender gaps or economic outcomes.

The existing research presented tends to analyse the policy in demographic or legal terms; few studies explore the emotional and gendered aftershocks it triggered decades later. A qualitative approach is needed to capture the feelings, pressures, and cultural contradictions that shape how daughters' step into leadership. Even so, mixed pressures between opportunity and obligation are repeatedly suggested by scholars (Lewis, 2010). These tensions are not just personal but are shaped by long-standing cultural expectations that often go unspoken in succession research. This addresses that gap by exploring media portrayals of how Chinese businesswomen experience the lasting impact of the one-child policy through their succession-related decision-making, emotional labour, and relational negotiations, all of which shape how they are perceived and how they work to be recognised as credible successors.

2.4 Push and Pull Motivations

Daughters in Chinese family-owned SMEs often step into leadership for reasons that are not easily categorised. The literature commonly frames these reasons as either pull motivations—such as opportunity, innovation, and personal interest—or push motivations,

which include necessity, family pressure, or a lack of other successors (Kirkwood, 2009). In practice, these drivers often overlap.

Pull motivations can reflect a desire to honour parents' sacrifices, introduce new ideas, or grow the business in a direction that feels more aligned with the daughter's skills and values. Some daughters are raised with the expectation that they will succeed professionally, especially if they are only children under the one-child policy (Fong, 2002). Others take pride in the family's legacy and see succession as an opportunity to strengthen it. In Li et al.'s (2020) study, several women viewed succession as a chance to contribute meaningfully while maintaining the company's traditions—showing that pull factors can also include cultural and emotional attachments, not just business ambition.

Push motivations are more circumstantial. Daughters may be called in when a father becomes ill, when the business is struggling, or when there is no available son. In these cases, the decision is driven less by choice and more by responsibility. Li et al. (2020) and Xian et al. (2020) both highlight how women successors often enter the business reluctantly, only to find themselves gradually taking on more responsibility and proving their capabilities over time. While male successors are frequently positioned as the default choice, women may face more resistance, needing to prove themselves both within the business and at home.

These motivations are rarely static. A daughter who begins with a strong sense of duty may later develop confidence and a clearer vision. Similarly, those who enter out of passion may find themselves adjusting their goals to manage family dynamics or preserve harmony. This evolving mix of internal and external motivations reflects the reality of succession in Chinese SMEs, where tradition, obligation, and personal growth often collide. Unlike much of Western values, which treats entrepreneurial motivation as either financial or individual, in the Chinese context, motivation is usually relational (Chen et al., 2021). See Appendix A, which summarises key contrasts between Confucian and Western values that shape gender roles and leadership perceptions. Leadership is not just about what one wants to do, but about what one feels they should do. This sense of duty to family, to legacy, and cultural values shapes not only why daughters step into leadership but also how they carry it forward. The upcoming section examines how cultural expectations manifest in more subtle, often invisible forms of gatekeeping that restrict daughters' progression despite demonstrated competence. These overlapping motivations shape how daughters are

perceived and treated as successors—yet motivation alone does not guarantee access to leadership. It then examines how Confucian expectations manifest through more subtle forms of gatekeeping that restrict daughters' progression, even when capability and commitment are evident.

2.5 Gendered Gatekeeping in Family Succession

Succession in Chinese family businesses is often shaped not by formal processes but by subtle interpersonal dynamics and unspoken expectations. Daughters may demonstrate competence and commitment yet still encounter significant gatekeeping, especially if their life choices, such as remaining unmarried or delaying motherhood, diverge from traditional ideals of womanhood (Xian et al., 2020). When daughters postpone or resist these roles, gatekeeping often emerges in subtle yet consequential ways. For example, they may be left out of key conversations, strategy meetings, decision-making, or reminded that leadership should not come at the cost of family harmony. Gossip, passive resistance, or even silence can serve as tools to question a daughter's suitability without confrontation. These moments often go unspoken but send a clear message that ambition is only acceptable when it does not challenge traditional norms. As a result, daughters must continuously assess when to assert themselves and when to step back, creating a form of emotional labour that is rarely acknowledged but always required. Leadership, then, becomes something they must earn and re-earn, not just through performance, but through their ability to remain tolerable to a system that was never designed with them in mind. Presence alone is not enough; belonging is negotiated through tone, timing, and the ability to signal that one's leadership will not disturb the family's gendered order. For many daughters, this creates a succession experience that is less about capability and more about navigating conditional visibility.

Similar to Williams and Dempsey's (2014) study of barriers to women's advancement, effective family succession and motherhood create a "tightrope" or "double bind," where daughters must navigate between being liked (feminine) and respected (masculine). To be viewed as credible successors, daughters must demonstrate traditionally masculine leadership traits, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and unwavering commitment to the family legacy, while also conforming to culturally expected feminine roles, notably marriage and motherhood. This conditional visibility reinforces a system where daughters are

present but not fully recognised, expected to lead while remaining aligned with the very gendered ideals that quietly limit their leadership.

Parental support, particularly from fathers, may hinge on expectations of obedience and self-sacrifice. Mothers often serve as informal custodians of Confucian propriety, encouraging daughters to prioritise harmony by deferring to brothers, even when those brothers are less engaged or less capable. These subtle enforcements reinforce a gendered hierarchy through “soft power,” preserving the family’s image of moral order (Wu & Yeh, 2021). When both sons and daughters are present, leadership is typically routed through male heirs, even if sons are unwilling or underprepared (Wang, 2010; Xian et al., 2020). Daughters often become “shadow successors,” shouldering operational responsibility without formal recognition (Xian et al., 2020; Yan & Sorenson, 2006). This subtle exclusion, rooted in emotional gatekeeping and informal hierarchy, gradually undermines daughters’ perceived credibility, even when competence is evident. Indeed, many daughters’ express frustration; they juggle emotionally demanding roles while being denied authority, resulting in tension between responsibility and recognition (Chen et al., 2017). Zhang Lili, a business consultant for second-generation family factory owners, highlights the intense pressure on these daughters: “they have infinite responsibilities and expectations, but pitifully, little practical experience” (Ran, 2024, para. 40). Even among highly educated daughters—83% with overseas degrees—many still encounter outdated views and resistance from older generations (The Hurun Research Institute, 2025). This highlights a deeper tension many women face: being caught between two value systems.

Although the one-child policy formally restricted most urban families to a single child, rural exceptions allowed a second child if the firstborn was a daughter—preserving the cultural preference for sons and reinforcing patriarchal expectations of succession. As a result, gendered hierarchies became more entrenched: firstborn daughters, no matter how capable, were often sidelined in favour of younger brothers deemed more “appropriate” heirs. On one hand, Confucian family ideals emphasise hierarchy, birth order, and a daughter’s duty to uphold family harmony. On the other hand, the Communist-era gender equality agenda encourages women’s full participation in public and professional life. For daughters in business families, this creates conflicting expectations: they may be professionally prepared yet remain culturally constrained, constantly navigating how to honour family while asserting

leadership (Xian et al., 2020). These tensions are reinforced early. Sons are typically groomed as successors—regardless of their interest or aptitude—under ideals of filial duty and male priority (Xian et al., 2020).

In contrast, daughters are encouraged to frame ambition as a moral duty, viewing leadership as an extension of family service or paternal legacy (Deng, 2015). This creates a form of conditional credibility, where daughters must again repeatedly prove themselves through sacrifice and conformity to gendered expectations, while sons inherit authority by default. In extended family firms, succession becomes even more complex amid cousin rivalries and intra-family politics. Here, decisions are often governed more by loyalty, seniority, and birth order than merit (Yan & Sorenson, 2006), quietly undermining the confidence and visibility of capable daughters through exclusion and under-recognition (Chen et al., 2017).

2.6 Quiet Leadership

In many SMEs, daughters occupy no formal title yet emerge as informal powerholders, overseeing operations, building networks, and shaping decisions behind the scenes. Scholars describe these using terms like “leading from the shadows,” where women maintain harmony and uphold relational values without publicly disrupting patriarchal hierarchy (Lewis, 2010). These daughters often assume emotional labour, manage staff dynamics, and ensure business continuity, work that is critical yet overlooked in studies focused solely on titles or financial metrics. Research on Chinese family businesses reveals that daughters negotiating successor roles construct their identity through behind-the-scenes influence, emphasising strategic humility and relational teamwork to gain credibility without challenging male authority (Xian et al., 2020). This quiet leadership is decisive and critical yet remains invisible in traditional analyses.

Feminist scholars have viewed this dynamic with concern, arguing that it masks inequality behind moral narratives (Yifei, 2016). Yet others suggest that it reflects cultural competence, women navigating gendered expectations without confrontation. Quiet leadership is not about staying silent; it is about how many daughters keep the business running while keeping family relationships intact. However, this strategy also has limits. Without formal recognition, daughters may struggle to gain external recognition from

suppliers, banks, or investors. Their contributions may be erased from company histories, even when instrumental to the firm's survival. There is an ongoing debate about whether quiet leadership is a sign of skill in navigating cultural expectations or a sign of inequality. It can, in fact, be both — a practical way to work within family and cultural norms, and at the same time, a quiet challenge to male-dominated leadership traditions. This gap in understanding guided the choice of cases in this study, focusing on examples where leadership influence exists without a formal title. This dissertation not only highlights these hidden forms of authority but also challenges the metrics by which leadership is defined, revealing how daughters reshape succession from the margins, without ever being fully seen. To do so, the cases selected were not limited to daughters with formal leadership titles but included those whose influence emerged through behind-the-scenes work. These were women seen leading from the shadows — shaping operations, maintaining continuity, or strategically stepping away.

2.7 The Silent Exit

The term “silent exit” refers to a phenomenon where capable daughters withdraw from leadership not because they lack ability, but due to sustained emotional strain, cultural constraint, and marginalisation. These exits are rarely dramatic—they often unfold quietly, as women step back to preserve dignity, family harmony, or personal well-being (Danes et al., 2005; Wang, 2010). Rather than confrontation, silence becomes a strategic form of resistance. Ip and Jacobs (2006) draw on studies to show that daughters, despite years overseeing operations and building internal credibility, are frequently replaced by less-involved younger brothers. These biases stem from cultural expectations and emotional gatekeeping rather than performance. In one case, the daughters' departure was not a failure of competence but a response to significant exclusion. Lacking formal recognition, she chose to start her own business, removing herself from a structure that refused to see her as the heir. These quiet departures, as Ip and Jacobs observe, complicate traditional ideas of succession.

Stepping away may seem like a loss, but it can also be a calculated choice to reclaim autonomy in settings where recognition is conditional and emotionally taxing. It was not about failure, but about boundaries — a recognition that credibility was not forthcoming, or that the cost of pushing further would strain family ties. These exits raise important questions about what is lost when leadership only recognises one kind of successor. In this light, the

“silent exit” becomes a form of moral protest, a way to reject inherited norms that measure leadership through gendered expectations rather than merit (Wang, 2010). This challenges dominant Western and patriarchal narratives that define leadership in terms of visibility and confrontation. Within these cultural norms, where open confrontation is avoided, absence can function as a subtle form of resistance that preserves relational harmony while conveying disagreement. For some daughters, choosing not to lead the family firm is not a retreat; it is a redefinition of success on their terms.

2.8 Media Narratives of Female Leadership

Media plays a significant role in shaping how female entrepreneurs are imagined and valued. In mainland China, narratives present successful women as morally upright, family-centred, and modest, embodying Confucian ideals rather than challenging them (Blalock & Lyu, 2023). The *Women in New Era* campaign exemplifies this. As a state-controlled media initiative disseminated across news platforms, social media, and official government websites, it promotes stories of women who balance traditional filial duties with professional success. Coordinated by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), a party-affiliated organisation under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the campaign functions as a tool for shaping gender discourse in line with state goals (Women of China, 2019). These “new-era successors” are consistently portrayed as dutiful daughters and selfless contributors, reinforcing a model of female leadership rooted in modesty, loyalty, and collective harmony. Even though these women are made visible and celebrated, the terms of their recognition remain tightly controlled.

Female leadership is deemed admirable only when it conforms to Confucian and Party-aligned values. For example, He Yongqun is praised for running her father’s business while supporting her family; Ma Juan is recognised for growing a snack enterprise while training disadvantaged women and caring for her parents; and Xie Ai'e is honoured for her decades of service as a rural health worker walking to remote villages (Women of China, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c). Their achievements are framed as moral triumphs, not as disruptive innovation or independent power. This strategic framing is not accidental; it reflects a deliberate effort to domesticate the idea of women’s progress in leadership roles. Rather than redefining gender roles, these portrayals naturalise female advancement within traditional hierarchies. Confucian ideals of harmony, duty, and modesty are repackaged to appear

modern, while the deeper structures of male authority and Party control remain unchallenged. The outcome is a paradox: women are more visible than ever, yet their visibility is tightly choreographed to avoid any threat to the gendered status quo. In this way, the campaign functions less as a celebration of gender equality than as a sophisticated form of ideological containment, offering symbolic recognition without redistributing real influence.

On popular Chinese social media platforms like Xiaohongshu (RedNote), Douyin (TikTok), and WeChat, which are marketed as spaces of personal freedom and entrepreneurial innovation, the most successful female creators often operate within tightly scripted moral boundaries. Guo (2022) notes that Xiaohongshu's Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) rarely promote ambition or financial success directly. Instead, they cultivate personas that are emotionally warm, family-centred, and modest, traits aligned with Confucian ideals. Similarly, Hong et al. (2023) demonstrate that WeChat "mompreneurs" embed entrepreneurship within maternal narratives, while Douyin live streamers often blend humour and sentiment with affirmations of filial duty. Yang and Seo (2022) found that women on WeChat strategically curate their self-presentation by using light-hearted humour, modest affirmations, and moral exemplification to appear likable yet respectable. They also control their audience through digital 'curtains,' limiting who can view their posts and for how long. These strategies reflect Confucian principles of social harmony and relational modesty, demonstrating how digital empowerment is not framed as disruption but as compliance with deeply embedded cultural expectations. These offline norms also shape online self-presentation. On Xiaohongshu and WeChat, success is narrated as service to family and community (Chen et al., 2017; Zhao & Jones, 2017), and newer behaviours such as personal branding, livestream selling, and direct calls-to-action are accepted when framed as continuity with duty, care, and filial respect (Sun, 2014).

By contrast, popular Western influencers on platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn frequently adopt assertive and self-promotional tones, claiming identity through phrases like "CEO of my brand," "self-made success," or "crushing my goals." Personal branding celebrates standing out, being bold, and directly claiming expertise. Empowerment narratives often revolve around independence, ambition, and visibility as power. Calls-to-action ("Join my course," "Build your empire") reflect a cultural logic where success is earned by standing apart, not blending in (Rohde & Mau, 2021). The core distinction lies in how female

entrepreneurial authority is performed and validated: Confucian-rooted platforms expect it to be earned quietly and expressed modestly to receive recognition, whereas; Western platforms reward its open display (Yang and Seo, 2022). The same act, starting a business, takes on radically different meanings depending on how it is narrated, received, and credited within its cultural context. In regions with similar cultural backgrounds to mainland China, but greater media diversity, representations of female entrepreneurs are more subtle. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, media portrayals emphasise women's strategic vision, personal ambition, and resilience, rather than just moral character or family support (Ip et al., 2018). By contrast, South Korean media blends Confucian ideals of respectability with emerging feminist narratives, celebrating women who exhibit both tradition-conforming filial values and assertive leadership (Cho et al., 2020). In Vietnam, community development efforts led by female entrepreneurs are often publicly praised, but deep-rooted attitudes remain conservative (Matsuda, 1997).

A national survey in Vietnam revealed that around 70–80% of women and approximately 60% of men believe that a woman's primary responsibility is managing household affairs, even if she works outside the home (Matsuda, 1997). While this reflects entrenched Confucian and patriarchal values, it is essential to note that the data is now three decades old. The high agreement among women reflects an internalisation of social expectations, where aligning with traditional roles is seen as a form of virtue or survival strategy in a conservative cultural climate. However, relying on outdated figures risks oversimplifying contemporary gender dynamics in Vietnam, where social and economic shifts have gradually altered these views. As Seymour et al. (2022) note, increased visibility in media or public life does not necessarily translate into shifts in societal expectations. Whether in China, Taiwan, or Vietnam, the media often amplifies stories of women who conform to culturally sanctioned values, filial piety, modesty, and moral service, while marginalising more assertive or unconventional leadership styles. Even in open media environments, portrayals tend to reward women who demonstrate sacrifice, loyalty, or relational competence, rather than those who challenge established hierarchies. In this sense, the media acts less as a mirror and more as a filter, shaping what forms of female authority are seen, validated, and remembered. For daughters in family-owned SMEs, this creates a narrow pathway to leadership: they are often expected to prove their capability quietly, maintain relational harmony, and lead without formal power. Their visibility, much like in

media portrayals, becomes conditionally celebrated only when it sustains, rather than disrupts, the cultural status quo. This sets the stage for understanding how many women succeed not by stepping forward, but by leading from the margins.

2.9 Summary

This research examines what it means for Chinese daughters to inherit more than just a business; they also inherit the weight of family expectations, cultural values, and silent obligations. This chapter has examined how Confucian values, policy legacies, family dynamics, media narratives, and SME structures shape the conditions under which daughters are accepted or excluded as leaders in Chinese family firms. A recurring pattern emerges that daughters are more likely to gain recognition when they frame leadership as a moral responsibility rather than personal ambition. Although existing research recognises structural and cultural barriers to daughters' succession, there is less attention to how daughters themselves navigate these dynamics — not by rejecting them outright, but by working within them in complex, often under-recognised ways. There remains limited exploration of how daughters reinterpret Confucian ideals—not to reject them, but to create space for leadership within their boundaries.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how daughters in Chinese family-owned SMEs construct authority through culturally rooted, emotionally intelligent strategies. It shifts the focus beyond formal succession processes to consider how leadership is shaped through narrative, emotion, and symbolism. Most research examines structural or cultural barriers but rarely asks about how public stories and media influence. Media stories, company profiles, and brand campaigns not only reflect reality, but they also actively shape public perceptions of who qualifies as a credible leader and on what grounds. These media representations of female successors, while increasingly positive, still tend to frame credibility around traditionally 'acceptable' traits — such as modesty, family loyalty, or relational sensitivity — rather than strategic competence. This reveals an implicit standard of visibility that shapes public acceptance. Even modern portrayals often recycle traditional values under a fresh surface. By examining how stories about duty, sacrifice, and loyalty are told, this study demonstrates how Confucian values serve not only as constraints but also as

resources that women subtly reshape to claim leadership on their terms. The next chapter outlines the methodology and methods used to investigate these dynamics.

Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological steps used to explore how Chinese daughters in family-owned SMEs navigate succession, leadership, and cultural expectations. The research process followed a qualitative, interpretive approach using secondary data (Tracy, 2020) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Here, a ‘media case,’ ‘case’ and ‘case study’ are used interchangeably and refers to an individual female successor as represented across multiple secondary sources. The unit of analysis is the media construction of these successors, specifically how their leadership experiences are portrayed within Chinese family-owned SMEs. This chapter begins by explaining why qualitative research is the most appropriate method to answer the research question. It then describes the secondary data collected, the criteria for selecting sources, and the steps taken to analyse them.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This study is guided by an interpretivist metatheoretical framework, which acknowledges that meaning is not fixed but instead constructed through context, language, and everyday practice (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Rather than seeking objective truths, it explores how leadership, gender, and family roles are understood within a Confucian cultural framework. Media narratives, interviews, and public discourse are treated not simply as reflections of reality, but as sites where cultural values are reinforced, negotiated, or quietly resisted. This lens supports a flexible and layered reading of succession, one that takes seriously how daughters interpret their roles, manage competing expectations, and navigate the unspoken boundaries of family and business life. This directly supports the research question by enabling analysis of how these narratives shape perceptions of female leadership.

3.3 Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how daughters in Chinese family-owned SMEs navigate Confucian gender expectations during business succession — an objective that requires interpretive depth, cultural sensitivity, and attention to narrative rather

than generalisable patterns. While quantitative research is valuable for measuring trends or testing variables across large populations (Tracy, 2020), it is less suitable for examining specific culturally embedded cases where layered emotions, traditions, and experiences shape leadership transitions. These transitions involve not only observable outcomes but also unspoken obligations, relational dynamics, and symbolic meaning, which require interpretation grounded in cultural context. A qualitative approach is therefore best suited to address the research question.

Primary data refers to data collected directly from participants through methods such as interviews, observations, or surveys (Tracy, 2020). This study will not involve primary data collection. In contrast, this study relies on secondary data, specifically media-based sources that include publicly available media texts, interviews, narratives, reports, and public accounts of female successors. These sources provide access to publicly constructed narratives, aligning with the study's focus on representation rather than direct lived experience. While they do not capture first-hand accounts, they reflect how women's leadership experiences are mediated, shaped, and interpreted within broader social and cultural narratives.

3.4 Methods

3.4.1 Secondary Data Collection Procedures

A purposive sampling strategy is used to identify and select cases from secondary data that meet the study's inclusion criteria. Tracy (2020) states "good qualitative researchers, at the very least, engage in purposeful sampling, which means that they purposefully choose data that fit the parameters of the project's research questions, goals, and purposes" (p. 82). Secondary data in the form of media narratives, business profiles, and public accounts is central to addressing this study's research question, as these sources themselves combine the cultural artefacts through which Confucian narratives of female leadership are constructed. Secondary data sources were primarily from newspapers, academic journals, video, and social media platforms. These sources offer a valuable entry point into real-world succession stories, highlighting both public narratives and personal accounts. However, these portrayals are shaped by editorial choices, cultural framing, and the intended audience of the media outlet. Such factors may emphasise certain traits, such as humility or sacrifice, while

underrepresenting conflict or financial challenges. Acknowledging these limitations is essential, as they influence how cases are presented and interpreted.

Succession is often a privately managed and emotionally sensitive process, particularly in Confucian contexts, where family hierarchy, gender roles, and filial duty heighten generational tensions. Using publicly accessible narratives that have already been shared in the public domain reduces ethical risk and protects participant privacy. This is especially important given the personal and, at times, conflicted nature of family leadership transitions.

3.4.2 Data Selection Criteria

For this study, the unit of analysis is a “media case,” which is defined as an individual female successor constructed from media sources, allowing her leadership experience to be examined through different representations and accounts. The research question focused on how Confucian gender norms shape daughters’ succession experiences and their media representation, this required narratively rich, contextually grounded data. To ensure alignment, the initial screening criteria were clearly defined. First, the firm had to be family-owned with an intergenerational transition. Second, the successor needed to be a daughter or female relative occupying a recognised leadership or co-leadership role. Third, the content had to reference Confucian values, such as filial piety, gender hierarchy, symbolic duty, or family harmony. Lastly, the business had to meet SME criteria or operate with SME-style ownership control, even if the firm had grown beyond standard size thresholds. These criteria ensured the cases selected would directly speak to the research focus on gendered and culturally shaped leadership transitions.

The sources were drawn from three broad categories. Academic literature, accessed through platforms such as EBSCO, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, provided theoretical grounding in areas such as Confucianism, entrepreneurship, and gender (See Table 1 for the data sources and platform type, See Appendix B for the full list of sources reviewed and Appendix C for the final 10 selected source locations). Institutional and NGO reports, such as those from UN Women, the Asian Development Bank, and Chinese government agencies, offered broader policy context on gender norms and SME dynamics. Finally, public media content such as news stories, business profiles, video interviews, and social media

commentary (particularly on platforms like LinkedIn, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo) provided narrative detail and cultural framing. Search terms included combinations of “Chinese daughter succession,” “female successor family business China,” and “gender family SME.” Search filters (e.g., by region, publication type, and date range) were applied to narrow the results. Searches were conducted from March to July 2025 using the AUT Library system and open-access media repositories.

Table 1

Data Source and Platform Type

Source Type	Platform	Reason
Academic literature	EBSCO, JSTOR, Google Scholar	Theoretical grounding
Institutional/NGO reports	UN Women, Asian Development Bank, Chinese government agencies	Policy context
Media	LinkedIn, Xiaohongshu, Weibo, news outlets	Narrative and cultural framing

The initial pool of 50 succession cases identified between 2015 and 2025 is a period reflecting the generational shift following the end of China's one-child policy in which daughters became increasingly visible as successors in family business. The study also included women who, in some cases, influenced the business before formal recognition was granted, as leadership often emerged through relationships, operational oversight, and behind-the-scenes work rather than through official titles alone. This meant the cases reflected the “quiet” or “shadow” leadership styles found in the literature review, where authority comes from trust and relationships rather than a job title. From this pool, 15 cases were shortlisted based on narrative richness, data availability, and relevance to the research question. See Appendix B, which outlines the narrowed list of 15 cases that met the inclusion criteria.

A final sample of five cases was selected: Yvonne Kam, Robyn Qiu, Gao Lin, Mao Lu, and Karen Chan. These five cases were chosen because they provided variation across industries, geographic contexts, and succession pathways, while each offering data sources and rich narrative detail directly relevant to the research question. Specifically, the five cases were selected because they offered variation across industries including hospitality, manufacturing, textiles, and fashion, while each providing sufficient narrative depth to be

analysed through the themes identified across the dataset. See Appendix B for a full comparison of the 15 shortlisted cases and their selection rationale. In qualitative research, saturation refers to the point at which additional data no longer generates new themes or insights (Saunders et al., 2017). Saturation was considered reached when the final set of five cases no longer produced new conceptual patterns or perspectives, but instead reinforced those already identified across the dataset, with later cases offering variation in expression rather than introducing new conceptual insights.

3.4.3 Data Selection Credibility and Quality Assurance

To strengthen the credibility of the final case selection, the five successors were screened by the researcher and two academic supervisors to ensure each case met the inclusion criteria and offered sufficient narrative depth for analysis. In qualitative research, triangulation refers to the use of data sources to help show different angles of meaning and strengthens overall trustworthiness (Tracy, 2020). This approach is consistent with similar studies — Xian et al. (2020), for example, used a comparable qualitative approach drawing on multiple secondary sources to examine how daughters in Chinese family firms negotiate successor identities. To improve the credibility of the findings, each case was analysed using two different source types for triangulation, totalling 10 web-based articles and case features (see Appendix C). Combined, these 10 sources amounted to approximately 4,800 words. This focused dataset enabled close comparative coding across cases, revealing shared patterns such as sacrificial succession, quiet leadership, emotional labour, and subtle forms of resistance within Chinese family-owned SMEs.

3.4.4 Secondary Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework because it is flexible enough to work across different data types while remaining rigorous and systematic. This was particularly relevant to the research question, where the data, such as media narratives, business profiles, and public accounts, varied in format and length. It is also well suited to interpretivism where the goal is to understand and interpret meaning within cultural context, consistent with the research philosophy outlined in Section 3.2. The framework's combination of deductive and inductive coding also allowed themes to be grounded in existing literature on Confucian values and gendered succession (Braun &

Clarke, 2006), while remaining open to patterns emerging directly from the cases themselves. NVivo software was used to organise codes throughout the process.

In applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the researcher first became familiar with the data through repeated reading, noting initial observations and impressions before any coding began. Then, as part of Step 2, NVivo was used to code transcripts into nodes, organise them into parent-child hierarchies, and store case attributes for comparison. Memos captured reflections during coding, while matrix and text search queries identified patterns and key cultural terms (e.g., "filial piety" and "harmony"). Visual tools in NVivo such as coding stripes and cluster maps highlighted overlaps, differences, and outliers. Coding was applied consistently across all five cases and reviewed through two rounds of recoding. As part of this coding process, a deductive frame drawn from the literature was applied, including codes such as filial obligation, gender hierarchy, and emotional labour (Braun & Clarke, 2006; as discussed in Chapter 2). An initial codebook (12 deductive categories) was iteratively refined to incorporate the inductive codes, merging overlaps and splitting overly broad codes.

Thirdly, similar codes were grouped to form potential themes, for example, "quiet resistance" and "strategic withdrawal" were combined to create the theme of "silent exit." Fourth, these themes were refined and tested for consistency across all five cases, with consideration of whether any themes had been excluded. Themes that only appeared once or twice were merged into broader ones; for example, "Gendered Control" and "Cultural Oversight" did not appear consistently enough across the cases to stand alone, so they were absorbed into existing themes. A theme was only kept if it appeared in at least 3 cases and added clear insight into how gender, family, and culture shaped succession (see Appendix C for the final codebook). Fifth, each theme was named and defined to reflect what it meant, not just what it described. "Sacrificial Succession" for example, captures the personal cost and obligation behind daughters taking over, and "Quiet Leadership" reflects how these women led informally without ever holding formal authority. Each theme was given a clear definition to make sure they stayed distinct and consistent across all five cases and linked back to the research question. Lastly, the themes were woven together into a written analysis that directly addressed how daughters in Chinese family-owned SMEs navigate Confucian

gender norms in leadership succession, and how these experiences are represented in Chinese media.

3.5 Researcher Positionality

As a second-generation daughter of a Chinese family-owned SME who chose not to inherit the business, my personal background inevitably shaped how I interpreted the data. This positionality, grounded in my Chinese heritage, offered both insider familiarity with the cultural and relational dynamics of succession and outsider perspective on alternative life and career pathways. My understanding of Confucian values and gender norms made me more attuned to nuances of deference, relational negotiation, and unspoken obligations. At the same time, I remained aware of the risk of over-attributing behaviours to cultural tradition. To mitigate this, I used triangulation, comparing two secondary sources on the same successor, and engaged in critical self-reflection throughout the analysis. This reflexive stance aimed to balance cultural insight with analytic rigour, ensuring that the findings reflect both successors lived realities and the broader theoretical context.

CHAPTER 4 CASE STUDIES

4.1 Overview

From the full pool of identified successors, five cases: Yvonne Kam, Robyn Qiu, Gao Lin, Mao Lu, and Karen Chan were selected for in-depth analysis based on the criteria outlined in Chapter 3. This chapter presents the five cases together and then discusses recurring patterns and their implications for how Confucian gender norms shape succession. All cases are analysed using the thematic approach described in Chapter 3. Brief profiles, selection rationale, and other cases considered are provided in Table 2.

Across the cases, daughters gained influence not through formal succession but through consistent, often unnoticed acts of leadership. These actions suggest that credibility in family business is not granted all at once, but slowly accumulated through trust, alignment, and time. What might appear as passivity or deference was often a deliberate choice to align with cultural expectations, allowing them to lead in ways that were subtle but highly effective.

4.2 Case studies

Case Study 1: Yvonne Kam

Keywords: 3rd-Generation, Yung Kee Restaurant, Hong Kong

Firm size: Mid-sized heritage Chinese restaurant (100 employees)

Leadership role: CEO (appointed following legal dispute after father's death)

Succession type: Unplanned, reactive; confirmed by court ruling

Yvonne Kam assumed control of Yung Kee Restaurant following the sudden death of her father and a public legal battle with her uncle over ownership. Her leadership was not predetermined but emerged under pressure, with intense media scrutiny framing her as the dutiful daughter preserving her family's culinary legacy. The Confucian ideal of filial piety was central to how her leadership was portrayed, helping authorise her succession despite legal controversy and entrenched gender bias.

Rather than disrupting norms, Yvonne Kam worked within them, presenting herself as a caretaker rather than a challenger. Her reforms, which included modernising the menu and strengthening operational governance, were presented not as personal ambition but as a moral

obligation. This emotional framing allowed her to gain credibility in a male-dominated sector. Notably, media outlets amplified this narrative, showing how public visibility can reinforce gendered interpretations of leadership.

Yvonne Kam's case is included for its strong alignment with Confucian ideals of filial duty and for illustrating how public narratives can authorise female leadership when emotional framing is strategically used.

Case Study 2: Robyn Qiu

Keywords: 2nd-Generation, Manufacturing SME, Jiangsu

Firm size: Mid-sized manufacturing firm (90 staff)

Leadership role: Acting CEO turned long-term leader

Succession type: Unplanned, reactive (due to father's illness)

Robyn Qiu returned from overseas to temporarily help manage the family business during her father's illness but ended up assuming the full leadership. Her case reflects a "push" motivation, she stepped in due to family need, not formal grooming. Despite this, she introduced supply chain improvements, lean manufacturing systems, and digitised procurement initiatives that stabilised the business and doubled profit margins over 5 years.

However, her leadership remains underreported in public discourse. The media has overlooked her contributions, possibly because her succession was uncontroversial and because she does not hold elite social status. This highlights a recurring issue in female succession: the emotional and strategic labour of daughters is often invisible when not accompanied by dramatic narratives or elite affiliations.

Robyn's case is included to show how daughters may be pushed into leadership only under exceptional circumstances, and how performance-based credibility can emerge even without media attention or elite credentials. Her experience highlights both the fragility and resilience of female leadership in traditional SME settings.

Case Study 3: Gao Lin

Keywords: 2nd-Generation Groomed Successor, Food SME, Shandong

Firm size: Small food processing business (40 employees)

Leadership role: Managing Director (formally appointed)

Succession type: Planned, gradual handover over 10 years

Gao Lin's father began preparing her for leadership during her university years by involving her in operations and financing her postgraduate business studies. Her leadership succession was a rare example of planned female succession within a traditional Chinese family firm. After formally taking over, Gao Lin secured international food safety certifications, improved cost-efficiency, and expanded product lines into new provinces.

What distinguishes Gao Lin's case is that she was formally prepared and supported by male elders without contest, suggesting that Confucian values can accommodate daughters, when framed around competence, harmony, and duty. Her multigenerational grooming process reflects a rare but growing acceptance of women successors in smaller, education-oriented family firms. The absence of media coverage underscores how stable, conflict-free succession by daughters is often overlooked and undervalued in both public and scholarly discourse. Gao Lin's case is included for its rare instance of planned female succession and for challenging the assumption that Confucian values always exclude daughters.

Case Study 4: Mao Lu

Keywords: Informal Successor, Textile Micro-SME, Jiangsu

Firm size: Micro-enterprise (20 employees)

Leadership role: De facto operational leader, not formally acknowledged

Succession type: Informal, invisible succession

Mao Lu runs day-to-day coordination, manages e-commerce sales, and negotiates with suppliers for her family's textile micro-business. However, her parents describe her involvement as "helping out," and there are no formal succession plans. Her labour, while essential, remains unacknowledged due to cultural beliefs that daughters are temporary members of the family who will eventually marry out.

Mao Lu's case shows the emotional burden of invisible leadership, where a daughter's labour is essential but unacknowledged. Her continued investment despite uncertain succession reflects the persistence of traditional gender beliefs in rural family firms—particularly the notion that daughters are temporary caretakers rather than rightful heirs. Her case also points to how succession silence can signal both cultural erasure and emotional endurance.

Mao Lu's case is included to highlight how Confucian gender norms can deauthorise daughter leadership in lower-profile, rural family businesses.

Case Study 5: Karen Chan

Keywords: Third-Generation CEO, Sparkle Collection, Hong Kong

Firm size: Large SME-scale fashion firm (300 staff, multi-million revenue)

Leadership role: CEO (previously Chief Marketing Officer)

Succession type: Reactive, elite-context succession

Karen Chan inherited Sparkle Collection after her father's sudden death, having previously led brand development as Chief Marketing Officer. She modernised the brand by integrating sustainability, youth-centric marketing, and digital commerce. Unlike other successors in this study, Karen Chan enjoyed substantial media visibility and public support, in part due to her Western education and access to elite networks.

Karen Chan's leadership was framed as both legacy preservation and strategic reinvention, allowing her to reinterpret Confucian ideals through a modern, aspirational lens. Her elite social status, media fluency, and global experience enabled her to transcend traditional gender constraints while still appearing dutiful. Her case demonstrates how daughters from privileged backgrounds may be uniquely positioned to challenge norms subtly—by blending tradition with transformation. This case is included to show how elite daughters can reinterpret Confucian values through brand positioning and public image in high-status family firms.

Table 2

Case Study Profiles of Chinese Female Successors in Family-Owned SMEs

Successor Name	Data Source(s)	Leadership Role	Sector & Firm Size	Region	Confucian Themes Present	Motivation Type (Push/Pull)	Reason for Inclusion
Yvonne Kam	<i>Heirs to three Hong Kong heritage restaurants,</i> ” <i>South China Morning Post</i> by Kee Foong (2021); and the case study “ <i>Yung Kee: Resolving Corporate Governance Troubles in a Hong Kong-based Family Business</i> ” by Holly Yang, Rencheng Wang, and Wee Kiat Lim (Singapore	Designated successor, CEO of Yung Kee post-father’s death	Heritage restaurant, large family-owned enterprise	Hong Kong	Filial piety, family legacy, pressure to honour father, intergenerational conflict	Push–Pull (pressured by tradition, but embraced legacy with passion)	Strong narrative on navigating posthumous succession, rebranding under legacy pressure, and female leadership within a patriarchal Confucian family business

	Management University, 2021)						
Robyn Qiu	<i>Young Chinese are taking over their family's factories, but not their traditional ways of doing business</i> Teng (2024)	Reluctant CEO	Metal manufacturing, mid-sized (approx. 90 staff)	Jiangsu, China	Duty to elders, family obligation, crisis response, silent self-sacrifice	Push (stepped in due to father's illness and external pressure)	Case reflects reluctant daughter succession under crisis, aligned with Confucian values of obligation and hierarchy, yet reshaped business using global education and digital tools

<p>Gao Lin</p>	<p><i>Succession questions raised as family firms face hurdles</i> Yu Ran (2024)</p>	<p>Formally groomed successor from youth</p>	<p>Regional food producer, SME</p>	<p>Shandong, China</p>	<p>Structured obedience, intergenerational harmony, honouring paternal vision</p>	<p>Pull (early grooming matched with personal ambition)</p>	<p>Clear example of Confucian-structured succession planning, shows successful generational transfer through early grooming and formal role allocation</p>
<p>Mao Lu</p>	<p>Sixth Tone (2024), <i>Factory reset: A new generation races to save China's family businesses</i> by He Qitong</p>	<p>Informal strategist, not officially recognised as leader</p>	<p>Textile workshop, micro-SME (<20 staff)</p>	<p>Jiangsu, China</p>	<p>Harmony, sacrifice, invisibility of female labour, backseat leadership</p>	<p>Push–Pull (burnout + duty)</p>	<p>Highlights silent yet significant role of daughters in family firms; shows gendered invisibility and</p>

							informal authority
Karen Chan	<i>Sparkle Collection: A rising generation's entrepreneurial dilemma</i> (Ivey Publishing case study) by Cheng & Au (2023); and the Girl City (2025) YouTube interview <i>Wearing Chinese Culture on Her Sleeves: Karen Chan</i>	CMO turned CEO post-father's death	Fashion retail chain, mid-sized (3-gen business)	Hong Kong	Silent resistance, filial tension, modernised duty through innovation	Push-Pull (family crisis + independent vision)	Embodies brand transformation while balancing Confucian expectations; transitioned from reluctant successor to strategic innovator within patriarchal business dynamics

Chapter 5 FINDINGS

This chapter examines how Chinese women successors in family-owned SMEs navigate leadership within the expectations of Confucian values, family roles, and business responsibility. Drawing from five case studies of Mao Lu, Gao Lin, Robyn Qiu, Yvonne Kam, and Karen Chan, the chapter reveals the seven themes: sacrificial succession, quiet leadership, financial entry, emotional labour, earned trust, conditional acceptance, quiet exit, rejection or resistance that demonstrate succession was rarely granted by default. See Appendix C, which shows the thematic coding table used to map cross-case findings. These women often stepped in not from ambition, but from a deep sense of obligation. Leadership was earned through persistent; behind-the-scenes work and emotional labour. Their journeys were shaped by family crises, cultural scripts, and gendered expectations, resulting in forms of influence that had to be earned subtly, often behind the scenes, and always in response to family and cultural expectations.

5.1 Sacrificial Succession

All five women viewed their entry into leadership not as the pursuit of personal ambition but as a necessary response to family needs. This aligns closely with Confucian ideals of filial piety and collective duty.

Since moving to Nantong, Mao Lu has grappled with the pressure of keeping her father's struggling factory afloat while also managing his expectations. She left behind a career at Ogilvy, one of the world's most recognisable advertising firms, only to find herself living in near isolation. With no close friends in the area, she stays in a room next to her parents, just steps from the factory floor. Her only regular break is a bi-weekly visit to Shanghai, approved by her father.

“My only companions are the dogs and the cat at the factory,” she laughs. Every 2 weeks, her father allows her 2 days off to visit friends in Shanghai, but even then, the reprieve is fleeting. “In Shanghai, I can breathe, but then I have to come back here, and it's like I'm right back in the same cycle” (Qitong, 2024, p.13).

Her tone mixes exhaustion with resignation. The sense of being trapped—geographically, emotionally, and professionally—suggests that her leadership was never truly

her own. She does not describe her role with pride or empowerment but instead as something she was expected to do, with little choice. Her story shows how leadership was not a milestone but a burden she felt compelled to carry. When reflecting on her earlier career path, she says:

“I regret it now... If I had chosen dentistry or law, I would have an independent career” (Qitong, 2024, p.2).

Similarly, Robyn Qiu, a Yale-educated and second-generation heir to her family's metal-hardware factory, describes feeling “a very strong responsibility to give back to manufacturing,” signalling obligation rather than self-advancement (Teng, 2024). After her consulting career, she channels her skills and personal visibility into the family factory—becoming its public face through factory-tour videos and process transparency for overseas buyers, rather than continuing to pursue an independent path (Teng, 2024). In doing so, she frames leadership as service to family and industry, not personal ambition—a digital form of sacrificial succession. Her decision was not framed as empowerment but as part of what she called an “invisible contract” (p.3) with her family. For both Mao Lu and Robyn Qiu, succession was a moral duty, shouldered when no one else stepped in, rather than a career move.

These examples show that leadership was not viewed as a strategic choice but as a moral imperative. Unlike sons who may be expected to inherit, daughters had to demonstrate a willingness to sacrifice—often without assurance of recognition. These examples suggest that female leadership in Confucian family firms is frequently permitted only when it mirrors sacrificial loyalty, not ambition. The burden of proof rests on daughters to show they are willing to give up more, not demand more. The idea of sacrifice emerges most clearly through the women's own words; their stories are not framed around ambition, but around responsibility. Media narratives tend to reinforce this view rather than challenge it, often highlighting emotional labour and duty over entrepreneurial drive. Together, these voices paint a picture of sacrificial succession, where leadership that is not chosen but taken up as a moral obligation.

5.2 Quiet Leadership

In 3 cases, leadership was not asserted through formal titles or overt authority but through quiet, deferential actions, such as adaptability, restraint, and emotional labour. This pattern was especially evident in Gao Lin, Mao Lu, and Robyn Qiu, whose leadership emerged not from command but from adaptability, restraint, and emotional labour. They did not call attention to their authority; instead, they negotiated space to lead in ways that would not disrupt the traditional power structure around them. Gao Lin did plan for a leadership role—but even then, they described their work in understated ways. Gao Lin pursued an MBA in Liverpool and Sydney specifically to prepare for the family business but downplays her position: “Rather than being a successor, I’m more like a flexible worker who goes wherever I’m needed (Ran, 2024a, p.6).” Her phrasing reveals a conscious effort to appear non-threatening, consistent with Confucian ideals that value humility and harmony over assertiveness.

Gao Lin’s early immersion in the family pork processing business—spending holidays cutting meat in the butcher shop—meant that her sense of responsibility was ingrained from childhood. This quiet form of leadership reflects a broader cultural logic: daughters can influence, but not command. Gao Lin’s reluctance to label herself a leader reflects an internalised script where female authority must be softened to be accepted. Her leadership, like that of the other successors, emerged not through self-assertion but through aligning with Confucian ideals of humility and adaptability. In this context, leadership was less about visibility and more about presence — showing up, following through, and being relied on. This quiet style reflects not a lack of ambition, but a deep awareness of what forms of authority are culturally recognised and sustainable. Leadership had to be subtle, negotiated through deference rather than dominance. Within these cases, leadership for women in Confucian family firms is not pursued; it is absorbed through duty. Authority must be earned not by ambition, but through emotional labour, quiet competence, and self-sacrifice. Daughters are expected to prove themselves without overt confidence, demonstrate loyalty without seeking recognition, and lead without disrupting the familial order. Their leadership is only accepted when it maintains harmony and reinforces, rather than challenges, traditional hierarchies. In this way, their authority remains conditional granted only when it is expressed as service, not power.

5.3 Financial Entry

A daughter gained influence by stepping into critical operational roles—especially in finance—rather than being handed formal titles. Yvonne Kam illustrates the theme of financial entry as a trained accountant who was asked to help with financial records after the family restaurant lost its Chief Accountant. Initially offering one day a week, she quickly became indispensable. Her insight captures how financial work became a gateway to broader involvement:

“Whoever looks after the numbers has a lot of power...To understand finances, I need to understand the whole operation, not just money (Foong, 2021, p.3)”

Yvonne Kam’s technical skills gave her credibility, but it was her consistency and loyalty that earned trust from her father. This mirrors a broader pattern where women often assume roles considered safe or low-profile, only later being recognised as decision-makers. For Yvonne Kam, leadership came not from claiming authority but from doing essential work others relied on. This case illustrates how credibility was earned through doing, not demanding. Financial oversight became a form of influence that was practical, respected, and culturally acceptable for daughters navigating traditional leadership spaces.

5.4 Emotional Labour

The emotional demands of leading within a family business were most visible in Karen Chan’s story at Sparkle Collection. Although identified only in her case, the strength and uniqueness of this theme justified its inclusion in the findings. Karen’s experience shows a distinct form of leadership built on emotional management, which differed from the ‘earned trust’ theme and was essential to sustaining authority and family harmony. Working with her father, sister, and husband, Karen Chan constantly navigated overlapping roles. Her reflection captures the intensity:

“When you work in the family business, if you fail, you fail the whole family... It is a job you cannot resign from.”

Karen Chan’s leadership required her to manage not just the business but the relationships that held it together. She balanced asserting authority with protecting emotional

ties—especially in a system where disagreement can be seen as disloyalty. This balancing act aligns with Confucian ideals that prioritise family harmony over individual assertiveness. Karen Chan’s experience reveals that emotional labour was central to sustaining leadership. What seemed like small, domestic tasks — managing conflict or supporting siblings — slowly built trust and visibility within the family. Rather than directly challenging traditional gender roles, this kind of emotional work became a form of influence over time. It was not always recognised as leadership in the formal sense, but it was leadership nonetheless — just expressed differently. Unlike Yvonne Kam, who found entry through technical skill, Karen Chan’s authority relied heavily on emotional management. While both women earned trust, their routes diverged—one through affective labour, the other through financial control. This contrast highlights how daughters tailor their strategies based on perceived family expectations, subtly choosing between emotional and operational pathways to credibility.

5.5 Earned Trust

Across all five cases, leadership was not given upfront—it was earned over time through consistent, behind-the-scenes work. Daughters did not step into visible leadership roles immediately. Instead, they proved their reliability through small, often invisible acts of commitment. Robyn Qiu shifted from a consulting career to take a public-facing role in her family’s metal-hardware firm, building trust through visible commitment rather than claims to status (Teng, 2024). Similarly, Mao Lu gave up her life in Shanghai to live beside her father’s factory, showing up every day despite emotional strain. Yvonne Kam steadily took over financial duties, not by asking for control, but by quietly becoming indispensable. While Mao Lu demonstrated commitment by physically relocating to live beside the factory—signalling visible sacrifice and unwavering presence—Yvonne Kam gained influence through technical competence and financial control. Mao Lu’s trust was earned through emotional and physical presence, a gesture that aligned with Confucian ideals of filial piety and self-denial. Her authority was not formalised but embodied through sacrifice, showing up daily despite isolation and regret.

In contrast, Yvonne Kam used her accounting expertise to quietly embed herself in the operational core of the business. By taking control of the numbers, she gained strategic visibility without openly seeking power. Her influence was pragmatic and indispensable, framed through competence rather than closeness. This contrast illustrates how daughters—

operating without automatic succession rights—must tailor their approach to what is most culturally palatable and situationally effective. Some rely on presence and loyalty to fill a moral compass; others on skills that address urgent business gaps. In both cases, trust is not inherited but earned through the labour that most aligns with the family’s needs and values.

In Confucian family firms, where hierarchy is respected and overt ambition can be misinterpreted, these women earned trust by showing up, not speaking up. Leadership came through proving their usefulness in ways that aligned with cultural expectations: dependability, modesty, and loyalty. These daughters were not selected; they demonstrated they could be counted on. Across cases, these acts of quiet perseverance created credibility over time. However, the form this took varied: for Robyn Qiu, it was crisis response; for Mao Lu, physical relocation, and sacrifice; for Yvonne, technical dependability. These variations suggest there is no singular model for how trust is earned—but the common thread is that trust must be proven gradually, not assumed based on position or potential.

5.6 Conditional Acceptance

Even when these women demonstrated their capability, their acceptance as leaders remained conditional. They had to constantly manage a narrow space between being assertive enough to lead and deferential enough to meet cultural expectations. Their success was filtered through their ability to act not just as business leaders but as ‘good daughters.’ Acceptance tended to hold when authority could be narrated as care—protecting jobs, honouring elders, safeguarding a legacy—so that change read as service rather than self-promotion.

If they pushed too hard or disrupted too quickly, they risked resistance from elders or peers. If they stayed too quiet, they remained invisible. Leadership was a negotiation—balancing modern business skills with traditional values like humility and harmony. Gao Lin, for example, modernised her family business but still described herself as a “flexible worker,” deliberately softening her authority. Similar strategies appear elsewhere: Yvonne Kam’s financial management gained influence because it was perceived as responsibility rather than status, while Robyn Qiu framed outward-facing branding as “giving back” to manufacturing; Karen Chan’s relationship work emphasised harmony over assertion. This delicate balancing act created emotional and strategic tension. It shows that female successors

in Chinese SMEs were not only managing businesses—they were constantly navigating how much influence was culturally acceptable to assert at any given time. The result is stabilising yet power-limiting: conditional acceptance keeps firms running, but it slows formal recognition, caps bargaining power, and helps explain why quiet leadership endures—and, when the balance cannot be maintained, why quiet exit becomes thinkable.

5.7 Quiet Exit, Rejection, or Resistance

Although not all women were openly rejected, the threat of resistance or marginalisation sat in the background. Across the cases, anticipating pushback shaped both what could be done and how it could be shown: the pace of change, the degree of public visibility, and the formality of titles or claims. Karen Chan paced brand changes carefully—“a job you cannot resign from”—because moving too fast risked rupture. Robyn Qiu made herself visible online, framing that visibility as “giving back,” so being seen did not look like a claim to status. Yvonne Kam built indispensability through financial oversight before taking formal authority. Gao Lin called herself a “flexible worker,” softening the appearance of power so that necessary decisions could proceed. Mao Lu carried the heaviest operational load while accepting a constricted social world—staying yet often feeling close to leaving.

Seen this way, “quiet exit” is less a single departure and more a series of small withdrawals that keep permission to act: proposals are slowed rather than forced; titles are softened; visibility is tied to service; and reforms are shifted to the back office until acceptance catches up. The “silent exit” theme shows that stepping back from leadership can be a deliberate and powerful choice, not just a loss. In cultures where open conflict can harm family relationships, quietly leaving can be a way to protest unfair treatment while keeping dignity and harmony. This challenges Western ideas that leadership is always about being visible, showing instead that absence can also be a strategic form of influence. These adjustments protected relationships and kept firms stable, but they also fixed a ceiling: authority moved fastest when presented as care and stalled when it looked like independence.

Often, daughters were allowed to act without being allowed to claim. Work could proceed so long as it was narrated as duty. Points of tension appeared when daughters tried to convert doing the work into a recognised status. For example: when Yvonne Kam moved from indispensable financial oversight to asking for formal authority; when Gao Lin shifted

from preparation to being named as leader; when Robyn Qiu's online visibility read as personal credit rather than service; when Karen Chan's rapid brand changes signalled overt authority; and when Mao Lu sought acknowledgement beyond "help" toward succession. The result is a narrow lane for leadership. The firm can stay stable and even modernise, but formal recognition comes slowly. When the effort needed to keep acceptance exceeds the actual influence gained, a quiet exit becomes a reasonable choice, stepping back from key decisions, declining titles, or planning to build elsewhere.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has shown that daughters in Chinese family-owned SMEs have their paths shaped by context: sudden illness, family crisis, or a brother's refusal to lead. What made them different was not just gender, but how they responded: with adaptability, quiet persistence, and a willingness to lead from the background. Their leadership was not about command; it was about connection. That difference matters. It pushes us to rethink how we define a "good successor," not just someone who knows the business, but someone who knows the family. Succession was not granted, it was negotiated, often under cultural pressure to conform rather than transform. Each woman's story revealed different paths, but Confucian expectations around duty, humility, and gender shaped all. Even with professional credentials, daughters had to prove themselves slowly, building trust through quiet reliability. Their leadership was relational and conditional, visible only when it fit within culturally acceptable boundaries.

Taken together, the findings explain how modernisation can progress while formal recognition lags: daughters are often permitted to act without being permitted to claim. Influence accumulates through steady, service-framed work, while titles and public credit follow slowly, if at all. Acceptance widened when change was presented as care for the business and its people and narrowed when it looked like personal status. The conversion from work to recognised authority was therefore limited, which helps to explain why quiet leadership persists and why formal power builds so gradually. A quiet exit did not occur in these cases, but the possibility of stepping back remained a background risk that shaped how decisions were paced and presented.

Chapter 6 DISCUSSION & THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the findings to highlight how second-generation Chinese daughters in family-owned SMEs navigate leadership shaped by Confucian values, gendered expectations, and business demands. It is structured as follows: Section 6.2 examines succession as sacrifice rather than strategy, where credibility is earned through personal cost. Section 6.3 explores how daughters build influence without formal titles, proving themselves through competence and trust before recognition. Section 6.4 analyses emotional labour as a central leadership tool for sustaining both business performance and family harmony. Section 6.5 considers succession as a form of strategic adaptation within traditional constraints. Section 6.6 outlines practical implications, Section 6.7 identifies future research opportunities, and Section 6.8 offers concluding reflections on how tradition can evolve through gradual, relationship-based change.

6.2 Succession as Sacrifice, Not Strategy

The themes of Sacrificial Succession, Quiet Leadership, Financial Entry, and Emotional Labour show that for daughters, succession is rarely a planned career move—it begins as a moral response to family need. This contrasts with dominant succession, which often assume deliberate grooming or strategic ambition (Ip & Jacobs, 2006). In all five cases, daughters stepped in when others would not, often at personal cost. Mao Lu abandoned her career and social life; Robyn Qiu paused her studies with no promise of return. Their leadership was rooted in sacrifice, not aspiration.

Daughters morally responding through succession to a family need aligns with Confucian values that elevate filial piety and collective duty. The four themes deepen these values: sacrifice was not just symbolic; it became the very condition through which daughters earned their place. Leadership was accepted not because they sought it, but because they gave something up for it. In Confucian contexts, credibility is earned through quiet persistence and visible loyalty to the family, not bold vision, or self-assertion.

6.3 Influence Without Titles

In Confucian family firms, influence often grows through invisibility—what this study calls relational stewardship. Daughters manage loyalty, family dynamics, and operational continuity before their leadership is acknowledged. A key pattern across the themes of quiet leadership and financial entry was that daughters rarely received formal leadership titles at the outset. Instead, they proved their worth through practical roles—especially in finance and operations. Yvonne Kam, for example, became indispensable by managing finances, while Gao Lin shaped production and modernised systems without ever referring to herself as the leader. Their entry point was not status—it was competence, framed in culturally palatable terms.

This reflects an implicit rule in Confucian families: leadership is permitted when it preserves continuity, not when it claims authority (Chen, 2001). Daughters found influence by doing the work, not by naming it. Their leadership was embedded in action, not designation. For example, while Mao Lu showed her commitment by physically relocating to live near the factory, Yvonne Kam earned trust through daily accuracy and reliability. Both strategies achieved influence, but only after they had first demonstrated long-term alignment with family values. This dimension challenges succession models that treat influence and visibility as inseparable. In Confucian family firms, influence often grows through invisibility, what this study calls relational oversight. Daughters manage loyalty, family dynamics, and operational continuity before their leadership is acknowledged.

6.4 Emotional Labour as Leadership

Unlike Yvonne, who found entry through technical skill, Karen Chan's authority relied heavily on emotional management. While both women earned trust, their routes diverged—one through affective labour, the other through financial control. This contrast highlights how daughters tailor their strategies based on perceived family expectations, subtly choosing between emotional and operational pathways to credibility. Leadership for these women was not just managerial, it was emotional. Karen Chan's story revealed how daughters shoulder the psychological weight of the business. She described leadership as something one "cannot resign from," highlighting the emotional entanglement between work and family.

This emotional labour was not incidental, it was central. In navigating complex relationships with fathers, siblings, and employees, these women had to protect harmony while keeping the business running. Their leadership style merged care with strategy, showing that for daughters, maintaining family relationships is often just as crucial as business performance. This complicates traditional definitions of entrepreneurship that focus on autonomy, growth, or profit (Shan & Tian, 2022). For these women, success involved balancing care, constraint, and quiet perseverance. Their emotional labour: smoothing tensions, absorbing criticism, avoiding confrontation, was part of how they built credibility. This form of labour remains undervalued in most entrepreneurial models, yet it proved essential in sustaining family firms.

6.5 Succession as Strategic Adaptation

Despite these constraints, daughters did not passively inherit roles—they actively shaped them. Over time, their leadership became more assertive, not because they demanded it, but because they earned it. This was evident in the way Robyn Qiu gradually moved from crisis helper to full-time leader, or how Karen Chan used emotional diplomacy to balance competing family interests. While the route was indirect, the outcome was influence.

One of the biggest tensions emerging from the cases was the pull between personal ambition and a sense of duty. Many daughters did not actively seek leadership; they stepped up because no one else would or could. In doing so, they often felt torn between honouring family expectations and pursuing their own goals. Unlike sons, who were often prepared from an early age to take over, daughters were expected to care, support, and sacrifice. But within that space, some redefined what leadership could look like — more relational, more flexible, and often more emotionally intelligent. These women adapted—not only to preserve the business, but to redefine what leadership could look like within tradition. Their ability to combine cultural fluency with business competence enabled them to evolve into trusted figures, even in firms that initially resisted their presence. This reflects a broader shift in Chinese family firms. As the Boston Consulting Group report (2022) notes, non-traditional successors are becoming more common, and daughters—once overlooked—are increasingly trusted to carry the brand forward. The findings suggest this shift is not driven by policy or external pressure, but by internal adaptation. Daughters are negotiating succession on their own terms, balancing respect with reform.

6.6 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to existing literature on family business succession, gender, and leadership in Confucian contexts in three ways. The research question aimed to understand how media portrays daughters in their navigation of succession processes. Together, these contributions offer a more contextually grounded understanding of female leadership in family-owned SMEs and highlight the importance of examining both cultural structures and narrative constructions in shaping succession outcomes.

First, this study challenges how Confucianism is used in existing family business research. Much of the literature presents Confucian values like filial piety, hierarchy, and collective harmony as something daughters simply inherit and either follow or reject (Xian et al., 2020; Yan & Sorenson, 2006; Wang, 2010). But the findings across the five cases tell a more complex story. Daughters were not simply following a script, they reinterpreted these values to make space for their own leadership, framing succession as an extension of filial duty rather than a challenge to tradition. As Kandiyoti (1988) argues, women often work within existing patriarchal structures rather than confronting them directly, and the cases here reflect that pattern clearly. Daughters used duty and filial responsibility to validate their presence, while quietly shifting what leadership looked like in practice.

Second, this research adds to existing understandings of leadership by showing how much of it happens away from formal titles and visible authority. Lewis (2010) describes this as leading from the shadows, where women build influence through behind-the-scenes work rather than holding formal authority. This was clear across all five cases, where daughters-built credibility through emotional labour, relational coordination, and quiet competence. Chen et al. (2017) found that daughters often take on leadership responsibilities without full recognition or control, and this study confirms that while also showing how daughters used it strategically over time. Their leadership merged care with strategy - Karen Chan described it as something she could not resign from, showing how for these women the boundary between family and business simply did not exist. This challenges traditional definitions of entrepreneurship that focus on autonomy and growth (Shan & Tian, 2022), because for these women, success was never only about the business - it was about holding the family together at the same time.

Third, this study adds to understanding of how public narratives shape what counts as acceptable female leadership in Chinese family firms. Blalock and Lyu (2023) show that state-controlled media consistently portrays successful women as dutiful, modest, and family-centred, and Guo (2022) shows how the same logic plays out on platforms like Xiaohongshu (RedNote), where female creators build personas aligned with Confucian ideals rather than personal ambition. What this study adds is a direct link between those external portrayals and the internal experiences of the women themselves. The way daughters are portrayed in media shapes the terms on which they are accepted as credible successors and influences how they present their own authority as a result. Seymour et al. (2022) note that greater visibility in public life does not automatically shift expectations, and that was clear across all five cases. Daughters became more recognised over time, but recognition did not always mean greater control.

6.7 Limitations and Future Research Opportunities

This study opens several promising avenues for future research. In-depth interviews with daughters, fathers, and family members could provide richer insights into how unspoken obligations, relational tensions, and emotional negotiations shape succession choices. A larger sample of firms, including those from different regions or industries, could test whether the patterns observed here are consistent or context dependent.

Comparative studies between first-generation and second-generation daughters—or between family-owned and non-family-owned SMEs—could show how leadership styles evolve over time. Long-term studies could also reveal how women’s leadership journeys shift as family dynamics change or societal expectations progress. Finally, further research could explore how public narratives about female leadership, particularly in media and advertising, influence both family perceptions and daughters’ self-concept as successors.

6.8 Conclusion and Final Reflection

Family business succession is often studied as a transfer of managerial control, yet in Confucian-influenced societies, it is also a deeply cultural and gendered process. While sons are typically assumed to inherit leadership, daughters’ pathways remain less visible and less understood. This research explores media case studies, showing how cultural values, family

expectations, and individual strategies intersect in shaping succession stories. By bringing these dimensions together, this study contributes to both succession research and gender studies, offering a culturally grounded redefinition of leadership in family firms.

While family firms may modernise rapidly—through better systems, financial discipline, and strong relational involvement—formal recognition is not always acquired by female successors. These strategies enabled daughters to stay credible within traditional expectations while still exercising real leadership. When families make succession criteria transparent and link recognition to clear milestones, they support smoother transitions and ease the emotional burden on successors who lead without being fully acknowledged.

Advisers and educators can support this process by recognising quieter forms of leadership—such as financial management, conflict resolution, and relationship-building—and by promoting narratives that credit both the outcomes and the often-invisible work that enables them. These findings challenge narrow definitions of leadership, showing that it can be a sustained period of proving built on persistence, cultural fluency, and relational consistency. Rather than discarding tradition, this study shows how it can evolve when change is framed as a continuation of care. This perspective invites scholars and practitioners to rethink how power, legacy, and gradual norm-shifting are understood and acknowledged within family firms.

For Chinese women in family businesses, influence is built quietly, through trust, relationships, and day-to-day problem-solving. Choosing to step back, or to lead from behind the scenes, can be a deliberate way of protecting family relationships and preserving personal well-being—not simply a sign of being pushed out. Where Confucian values and patriarchal norms still shape ideas of authority, these strategies offer women a way to exercise agency without open conflict. This reframes such decisions as active and strategic, offering a definition of success that makes space for cultural expectations and personal values while leaving a legacy of competence and stability for the next generation.

These findings also hold implications for China's economic transformation. As the country shifts toward a more diversified, innovation-driven economy, family firms remain key economic players, particularly in second- and third-tier cities. The ability of women to navigate leadership within these culturally bound yet economically significant spaces is not

just a family matter—it is part of China's broader story of balancing tradition with modernity. By making space for relational, behind-the-scenes leadership, family firms can tap into under-recognised talent that sustains resilience and adaptability in a competitive market.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Comparison of Confucian and Western Values in Business

Confucian Values	Description	Western Values	Description
Filial Piety	Strong obligation to honour, obey, and care for one’s parents and elders, often influencing business decisions made in the interest of family reputation or legacy.	Individual Autonomy	Emphasis on personal choice, independence, and self-directed success, often prioritising personal growth over familial expectations.
Respect for Hierarchy	Clear social and generational ranking; elders and male figures are expected to lead. Decisions may defer to family seniors, even in business.	Equality	Belief in equal power distribution across roles and generations. Leadership can be based on merit rather than age or gender.
Harmony and Group Consensus	Avoiding conflict, promoting social cohesion, and preserving relationships is prioritised—even if it limits transparency or innovation.	Open Disagreement and Debate	Valuing honesty, direct feedback, and constructive conflict to improve outcomes and drive innovation.
Face	Maintaining social respect, avoiding public shame, and preserving the family’s external image are central to behaviour.	Self-Expression and Visibility	Encouraging self-promotion, personal branding, and open recognition of individual achievements.
Gendered Family Roles	Women are often expected to serve as caregivers and supporters, placing business	Gender Equality	Women and men are expected to have equal opportunities in work,

	ambitions behind domestic duties.		leadership, and family roles.
Risk Aversion	Preference for stability and gradual growth, partly to avoid failure that could damage family honour or cohesion.	Innovation and Risk-Taking	Embracing uncertainty and change as necessary for entrepreneurship and competitive advantage.
Collective Responsibility	Success is viewed as a shared family or community achievement, rather than individual effort.	Personal Accountability	Individuals are responsible for their own decisions and outcomes, whether success or failure.

Note. This table summarises key differences between Confucian and Western cultural values, highlighting how each may influence leadership expectations, gender roles, and decision-making within family-owned SMEs.

Appendix B

Media Sources Reviewed for Case Selection

Case	Successor Name	Source Type	Title of Source	Business	Year	Leadership Description	Confucian Themes	Reason for Inclusion
1	Eleanor Ting, Lilian Ting, Jona & Mei Lum	News Article	The Mothers and Daughters Fighting to Keep Chinatown Alive (Macabasco & Mei-Ling, 2021) (Sarnoff, 2024)	Ting's Gift Shop; Wing on Wo & Co., New York	2021	Chinese American daughters preserving Chinatown family legacies through modern means	Filial piety, heritage	Diasporic daughters reclaiming family legacy amid cultural decline
2	Yunlan Zhang	Academic Case Study	Cotte Yolán: Succession and Strategic Transformation (Jean & Zhao, 2021)	Cotte Yolán (Fashion SME), China	2021	Took over high-end apparel firm and led major restructuring	Strategic obedience	Shows vision-led transformation balancing tradition and modern retail

3	Gigi Ng	News Article	Heirs to three Hong Kong heritage restaurants (Foong, 2021)	Ser Wong Fun, Hong Kong	2021	Successors modernised traditional cuisine while managing generational conflict	Family duty, legacy	Blends Confucian loyalty with innovation under media scrutiny
4	Lan	Academic Case Study	A Black Swan in Malaysian Chinese Family Business (Xavier & Gan, 2022)	Fishing (Processing & Distribution), Malaysia	2022	Sister and brother jointly inherited and restructured father's firm	Gender hierarchy, obedience	Highlights gendered expectations and rare female leadership case
5	Yvonne Kam	News Article	Yung Kee: Resolving Corporate Governance Troubles in a Hong Kong-based Family Business (Yang et al., 2021)	Yung Kee Restaurant, Hong Kong	2022	Navigates legacy pressures and brand identity tensions post-father's death	Hierarchy, sacrifice	Shows depth leadership amid legacy friction

6	Karen Chan	Academic Case Study, YouTube	Wearing Chinese Culture on Her Sleeve; Sparkle Collection (Girl City, 2025)	Sparkle Collection (Fashion SME), Hong Kong	2023	Stepped into CEO role to rebuild after father's death; led strategic brand shift	Resistance, transformation	Powerful example of cultural branding and female-led innovation
7	Cindy, Judy, Julie	News Article	The Mothers and Daughters Fighting to Keep Chinatown Alive (Macabasco & Mei-Ling, 2021)	Family Gift Shop, New York	2023	Sisters revitalising Chinese American retail legacy through collaboration	Collective duty, harmony	Example of intergenerational harmony and collective autonomy
8	Huang Xiyi	News Article	China's family-run businesses face succession issues (Erchi & Wei, 2023)	Machinery Manufacturing, Foshan, China	2023	Took over the heir of the business. Sacrificed her ambitions,	Sacrifice, responsibility	Inheritance

						struggled to learn how to run a business, calling it “very bitter and lonely”		
9	Mao Lu	News Article	Factory Reset: A New Generation Races to Save China’s Family Businesses (Qitong, 2024)	Family Textile Business, Jiangsu, China	2024	Strategic force behind business but not publicly acknowledged	Sacrifice, invisibility	Spotlights informal labour and invisible female leadership
10	Min Yi	YouTube	Why This Chinese Family Left Everything to Serve Wonton Noodle Soup in New Zealand (StoryBites, 2024)	Family Food Business, Christchurch, New Zealand	2024	Took over parent’s shop from childhood	Filial piety, responsibility	Inheritance

11	Robyn Qiu	News Article	Young Chinese taking over family's factories (Teng, 2024)	Jiangsu Metal Factory; Cosmetics Co., China	2024	Yale graduate returned post-COVID; reshaped business model	Crisis response, obedience	Demonstrates reluctant leadership shaped by Confucian obligation
12	Gao Lin	Newspaper, News Article	Succession questions raised as family firms face hurdles (Ran, 2024)	Linyi Shunfa Food Co., Shandong, China	2024	Groomed from youth to succeed; trained abroad; loyal to family succession plan	Grooming, hierarchy	Reflects structured planning and strategic successor investment
13	Guo Mohan	Magazine	Father, Daughter Tell Stories Through Embossed Iron Plates (Lin, 2024)	Iron Plate Craft, Hebei, China	2024	Took over iron craft business post-graduation; now preserves	Heritage, continuity	Illustrates narrative-driven revival of artisan family enterprise

						legacy through storytelling		
14	Wang Lingli	Magazine & News Article	Agricultural-Business Manager Pursues Personal Value, High-Quality Production (Jiamin, 2024)	Agricultural, Chongzhou, China	2024	Followed father's agricultural footsteps	Duty	Rural innovation and gender
15	Liu Huiting	Magazine & News Article	Young Agricultural Machine Operator Realizes Dream in Fields (Jun 2025)	Agricultural SME, Shaoxing, China	2025	Revived ancestral farmland with modern tools; champions women's rural empowerment	Duty, humility	Compelling case of rural innovation shaped by ancestral reverence

Note. Narrowed list of 15 sources screened for relevance to female succession, cultural themes, and narrative depth in Chinese family-owned SMEs. Final 5 selected for thematic coding.

Appendix C

Triangulation Summary by Theme and Code

Case Name	Data Sources	Main Theme	Sub-theme	Evidence/Quote (with source)	Initial Interpretation	Link to Research Question
Yvonne Kam – Yung Kee Restaurant	(Foong, 2021) (Yang et al., 2021) (Singapore Management University, 2022)	Financial Entry	Entrapment through accounting role	<i>“In such a traditional business model, those who control the money have great power”</i>	Finance became a gender-acceptable entry path, but she became increasingly involved.	Demonstrates how daughters are ushered into succession through practical, "safe" roles.
		Sacrificial Succession	Duty amid crises	<i>“Dad wanted someone trustworthy... juniors were not able to run the business.”</i>	Personal goals sidelined to rescue business during internal turmoil.	Shows how daughters assume leadership out of obligation during instability.
		Emotional Labour	Navigating conflict and expectations	<i>“The public dispute tore the family apart”</i>	Emotional costs of succession extend beyond business to family dynamics.	Highlights the emotional strain of leadership in family firms.

Robyn Qiu – Metal Hardware Factory	(Teng, 2024) (GIP Digital Watch, 2024)	Earned Trust	Innovation as proof of value	<i>“More than 500 buyers contacted her since May”</i>	Trust is earned through results, not inherited.	Suggests daughters gain influence by modernising and performing.
		Sacrificial Succession	Return framed as repayment	<i>“Strong responsibility to give back to manufacturing”</i>	Educational success becomes a resource for giving back.	Demonstrates Confucian framing of obligation and gratitude.
Gao Lin – Linyi Shunfa Food Co.	(Ran, 2024a) (Ran, 2024b)	Emotional Labour	Mixed feelings toward succession	<i>“I resented this enterprise for depriving me of time with my parents”</i>	Childhood sacrifices create ambivalence, not entitlement.	Links personal sacrifice to inherited responsibility.
		Quiet Leadership	Working without formal authority	<i>“More like a flexible worker who goes wherever I’m needed”</i>	Leadership expressed through contribution, not title.	Reveals how women often lead informally within family SMEs.
		Conditional Acceptance	Duty over desire	<i>“Rather than being a successor...”</i>	Accepted role not out of ambition but obligation.	Reflects reluctant, adaptive leadership under cultural pressure.

Mao Lu – Jiangsu Textiles	(Qitong, 2024) (Future Family Office, 2024)	Sacrificial Succession	Career exchange for family need	<i>“Now my future is tied to the factory.”</i>	Gave up personal ambition for family legacy.	Demonstrates tension between individual goals and inherited duty.
		Gendered Control	Surveillance by father	<i>“He judges everything from her clothing to her personal life.”</i>	Under constant paternal scrutiny even in leadership.	Shows how patriarchal norms persist post- succession.
		Quiet Exit or Resistance	Emotional toll of returning	<i>“I kind of regret it now”</i>	Succession is not framed as empowerment but entrapment.	Highlights emotional burden and questioning of choice.
Karen Chan – Sparkle Collection	(Cheng & Au, 2023) (Girl City, 2025)	Sacrificial Succession	Succession as familial contract	<i>“You cannot resign... if you care about your family reputation.”</i>	Feels morally and emotionally trapped in business.	Reflects Confucian norms around obligation and honour.
		Cultural Oversight	Business as heritage	<i>“Wearing Chinese culture on her sleeves.”</i>	Embraces leadership through cultural representation.	Shows how succession becomes a platform for cultural continuity.
		Emotional Labour	Managing family work tensions	<i>“You may not disentangle personal and</i>	Emotionally navigates blurred personal/professional boundaries.	Highlights mental burden of family leadership.

				<i>work emotions...</i>		
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Note This table shows the thematic

coding of the final five case studies, with themes drawn from triangulated media and case sources. Triangulation improved credibility and provided a fuller picture of female succession in Chinese family-owned SMEs

