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# “Having it all” – at what cost? Strategies of Chinese highly skilled women in Japan to combine career and family

**Abstract:** Being both foreign and female, Chinese highly skilled women face double discrimination in corporate Japan. Yet this study argues that due to their transnational networks and expertise they turn unfavorable circumstances for work–family balance into strategies to improve work–career compatibility to a degree still unattainable for many Japanese women. While outcomes thus seem rosy from a labor market perspective, these strategies come at a cost both for the women and for the Japanese labor market. Strategies include leaving Japan to join the Chinese labor market, family separation, and delayed marriage or childbirth.

**Keywords:** labor migration, highly skilled workers, China, work–family balance, female migration

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## 1 Introduction

Japan’s continuous economic stagnation induced Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 25 September 2013 to publicly address one strategy to boost the economy: the inclusion of more women in the labor market after marriage and childbirth (Kantei 2013). It is well known that women still face (institutionalized) hurdles for upward mobility in Japan’s career system. Among these are the gendered dual-track employment system and (still) largely seniority-based promotions, which make it harder for women with employment breaks after childbirth to advance within Japanese companies (Ono 2007: 277). This further aggravates the difficulties to combine family and career that already exist for most women in industrialized countries. The exclusion of well-educated women from the labor market costs dearly: “[C]losing the gap between male and female employ-

ment would boost Japanese GDP by as much as 16 %,” studies suggest (WEF 2013: 31).

Another less widely discussed solution to boost Japan’s international competitive ability, and to alleviate the looming labor shortage resulting from demographic change, is to include more highly skilled foreigners in its labor market. Measures include plans to raise the number of foreign students and the implementation of a points-based visa system facilitating the entry of highly skilled workers. In fact, foreign students have proven a reliable source of new workers for the Japanese labor market and companies are hiring them in ever-growing numbers (*Japan Times* 2013). However, both policies generally only target temporary migration and many highly skilled migrants see stays in Japan as a stepping stone to boost their careers elsewhere. The largest share of foreign students and workers comes from the People’s Republic of China (hereafter: China).<sup>1</sup> Retaining the Japan-trained talent in the Japanese labor market is crucial to Japan’s development and continuing growth of its transnational economy.

In combining career and family, Chinese women in Japan face the same difficulties as Japanese women, added by their foreigner status, which may further hinder career advancement. Most highly skilled Chinese come to Japan on student visas for a limited amount of time as an investment in their human capital on which they hope to cash in after their return to China. Yet, many stay longer than they originally intended. They enter the Japanese labor market, gain working experience, become valuable parts of the Japanese economy, and form families in Japan. With rising family responsibilities in the life course, these career-ambitious women use various strategies to ensure work–family balance in Japan, but migration is also an option. China’s economic rise and its arguably less gendered labor market structure make it an increasingly attractive destination.<sup>2</sup> In addition, migrants’ parents in China may assist with childcare. Why, then, do Chinese highly skilled women not opt out of the Japanese labor market and move back to China? Which strategies do they adopt to overcome existing hurdles and combine work and family goals?

This paper maps best-practice approaches (from a labor market perspective) by Chinese highly skilled women in Japan to create work–family balance. At its center stand career and private strategies of continuously employed fe-

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<sup>1</sup> The number of foreigners in Japan has declined after the Great East Japan Earthquake and their share in Japan’s population in 2012 stood at 1.63%; 32.1% of all registered foreigners held Chinese nationality (MOJ 2013).

<sup>2</sup> China ranked 62<sup>nd</sup>, Japan only 104<sup>th</sup> (of 136) for “economic participation and opportunity” in the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF 2013: 13).

male Chinese highly skilled workers and career-oriented students, who are planning on having or already have a marriage partner and children. The study combines work–family balance approaches with the perspectives of gender-role ideology and the life course. It thereby expands concepts of work–family balance in addition to analyzing the strategies of the under-researched group of highly skilled female migrants.

After presenting theory and methodology of the study, Section 4 works out the structural constraints Chinese highly skilled women face in the Japanese and Chinese labor markets with respect to work–family balance. Section 5 maps their coping strategies, thereby revealing that the Chinese women examined actually turn their structural disadvantages into additional options to improve working and family lives as well as work–family balance. As will be shown, it is precisely because of their foreigner status that they perceive chances and problems in the Japanese economy differently and have access to more diverse resources. Yet despite their agency in negotiating the best possible compromise between their own preferences and responsibilities, they sometimes are unable to overcome structural constraints set by gender norms.

## 2 Work–family balance, conflict and solution strategies

Relevant to a study of strategies of female migrants trying to gain the best possible balance of career and family are conceptualizations of work–family balance and rational choice. Economic and social structures in host and home country change and may influence where migrants perceive chances for work–family balance to be best. Priorities and responsibilities shift in the life course.

Using the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1989) as a larger framework, sociologist Voydanoff (2008) proposes a model of the work–family interface. It places the individual in several overlapping social settings of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems. The micro-level includes interactions and roles of a person in the immediate networks: community, family, and work realms. Meso-system refers to the linkages between micro-systems, while the exo-system denotes “external environments in which a person does not participate but which exert indirect influence on the person” (2008: 38). One example of the latter is the work setting of the husband. The macro-system influences all the lower levels in that it provides “life-course options, patterns of social interaction, shared belief systems, and life styles” but also the “structure of the economy and the workplace, family demographics and ideology” in

addition to gender roles, among many other issues (2008: 38). This larger cultural, social, and economic structure is of particular interest for the sample examined, as migrants are influenced by the structures of both their countries of origin and residence.

Work–family relations constitute a meso-system, combining the micro-systems of the work and the family realm. Voydanoff (2008: 48) defines work–family balance as a “global assessment that the work and family resources are sufficient to meet work and family demands such that participation is effective in both domains.” Conflict may arise from time constraints but, more importantly, also from strains in one domain (work, family, or community). The strain relevant for this study may arise from problems at the workplace, but also from the family realm: “marital conflict, children’s problems, caregiver strain,” etc. (2008: 42). The well-being of the individual and the performance in all domains is severely compromised if negative spillover or role overload occur. This has negative implications not only for the well-being of the individual and the family, but also for the economic performance and potentially the location choice of migrants.

Feelings of work–family balance or conflict are subjective and influenced by gender-role ideology. Gender-role ideology denotes the understanding of “proper” roles and behaviors of men and women in a society (Korabik et al. 2008: 223). How a couple makes career and family decisions, how they share family and household responsibilities, whose career plans take precedence, all these questions are negotiated with a given understanding of gender roles. In addition, every person needs to fulfill various roles in everyday life. The number of roles and priorities attached to them differs in the life course. They include at least that of daughter and worker and later that of spouse and mother.<sup>3</sup> While taking on multiple roles can have positive effects such as feelings of success, goal achievement, and contributions to social contexts, combining family and work roles can also lead to work–family conflict or work–family negative spillover (Shimada et al. 2010: 335–336; Suzuki 2007: 14). Responsibilities that come with the roles differ in intensity over time: While students are often free to focus on their education and careers without family constraints, things change with marriage, childbirth, and ageing parents, not to forget heightened responsibility at the workplace. Role and work–family conflict are more likely to occur in such circumstances.

Strategies to ensure high levels of balance are preventive or reactive, that is, they address anticipated and current problems, respectively. They may in-

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<sup>3</sup> The majority of women interviewed stated that they wanted to get married and have children (unless that was already the case; see Table 1).

clude gaining job flexibility by switching jobs or choosing self-employment, or using paid or community services to help with family care (Voydanoff 2008: 49). The rational individual picks one strategy from a number of options depending on which one subjectively promises to be the best compromise between personal preferences, work and family responsibilities. Rationality does not mean that the women examined objectively pick the best or most logical option to achieve goals (cf. Coleman 1994: 17–18); it refers to the attempt of “maximization of subjective expected utility” (Stanovich 2010: 9). The woman acts in a larger system that shapes the options that are available and acceptable to her and she considers expected consequences for different spheres of her life that all possess different priority. Migrants face additional challenges in a foreign country but can also choose from more acceptable (transnational) options, one of them being return migration.

### 3 Sample and methodology

Data were collected during three fieldwork periods in 2011 and 2012 in Tokyo, Shanghai, and Beijing. Semi-structured interviews with 52 women were conducted. Sampling methods include purposive but also snowball sampling. The women in this study are either continuously employed women or career-ambitious students from Japan’s top universities. Students are included in the sample, because they constitute the “new” foreign workforce and their perceptions and goals are crucial for their future decisions of whether they will continue to see their life goals as attainable in Japan. Women who left the labor market were not part of this study, as the aim was to examine women’s best practice approaches to combining family and career.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were conducted in Japanese, Chinese, and English, and coded in three stages according to grounded theory coding methods (Strauss and Corbin 1998).<sup>5</sup>

Forty-one of the women (24 studying, 17 working) whose strategies are included in this paper were interviewed in Japan, 11 in China (3 studying, 8 working). Of the 41 interviewed in Japan, 37 are still in Japan, while 2 have returned to China and 2 have moved on to the United States. Nineteen women had spent up to 5 years in Japan, 15 women up to 10 years, and 18 women

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<sup>4</sup> Best practice does not mean to cast judgment over those career-ambitious women that did (temporarily) retire from the labor market; it simply seeks to address a labor-market perspective.

<sup>5</sup> The three rounds consist of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 143). The goal is to develop categories and theory from qualitatively collected data.

**Table 1:** Employment and marital status of the participants.

Employment status	Marital status					Total
	Single	In a relationship	Married	Divorced	Widowed	
Student	18	(5 C/1 J) 6	(3 C) 3	0	0	27
Employee	8	(3 C) 3	(4 C/3 J/1 O) 8	(1 O) 1	0	20
Self-employed	0	(1 J) 1	(2 C/1 J) 3	0	(1 C) 1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>52</b>

(Nationality of spouse/partner: C: Chinese, J: Japanese, O: Other)

more than 10 years. Age differed from 19 to 51 at the time of the interview. Most women initially entered Japan on a student visa. Their marital status is reported in Table 1. Ten of the women had borne children in wedlock; two of those had children below school age.

“Highly skilled” in the literature usually is defined by level of education (holders of tertiary degrees; see Chaloff and Lemaître 2009: 4) or by profession (researchers, business executives and managers, and IT specialists; see OECD 2002: 2). For this study, only students from top Japanese universities (according to national and international rankings) were recruited as interviewees and workers had to be at least division heads (or untenured professors in the academic context) or have successfully started their own companies.<sup>6</sup> Five students were still working on their first degrees; all other women had obtained at least a bachelor’s degree (23 held a master’s, 5 had PhD degrees). Thirty-three women had working experience in various types of companies: Japanese (22), Chinese (22), international (5), or their own businesses (6). At the time of the interview, 11 were working for Japanese employers. Of those, 5 worked in academia in Japan and 4 worked in large and 2 in medium-sized Japanese companies. Contents of work and studies of the women included in the sample are reported in Table 2.

<sup>6</sup> Seven workers had only recently started out in their new jobs: for them, their university affiliation or high entrance level at the companies justified their inclusion in the sample. At the time of the interview, 27 women held student visas, 4 academic visas, 6 working visas, 2 family and 4 permanent residency visas, while 4 women had taken on Japanese nationality.

**Table 2:** Participants’ fields of employment/studies.

Field of employment/Studies	Frequency	% for workers	% for students
Public administration	1	4	
Finance	5	20	
Consulting	2	8	
Sales	3	12	
Trade	3	12	
Education	2	8	
Research	5	20	
IT	2	8	
Maker	2	8	
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100</b>	
Social sciences student	9		33.3
Business student	11		40.7
IT student	1		3.7
Engineering student	3		11.1
Law student	3		11.1
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>27</b>		<b>100</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>		

## 4 Macro-, exo-, and micro-level factors influencing work–family balance

In accordance with human capital theory in migration, which suggests that migrants see movement as a long-term investment (DaVanzo 1981: 92), most of the participants in this study came to Japan with the temporarily limited plan to enroll in university programs or gain working experience. People are expected to move if another location provides better employment and remuneration. In this line of thinking, there is little reason why highly skilled Chinese women should not return to economically booming China to pursue seemingly ample opportunities. Yet, according to Iredale (2001: 8), the single focus on human capital ignores factors leading to dissatisfactory circumstances on labor markets such as discrimination. It also overlooks gender differences and family considerations.<sup>7</sup> This study merges economic and sociological approaches

<sup>7</sup> Literature on highly skilled migration has almost exclusively focused on male migrants, ignoring family factors (Kofman and Raghuram 2005: 152), reducing female migration to “trailing” and focusing on compromises accompanying women had to make in the labor market (Raghuram 2004: 305). One exception exists in those parts of the labor market that are heavily

through its focus on career-oriented Chinese women and their strategies to combine work and family responsibilities. The following subsections present constraints within the macro-, exo-, and micro-systems for these women.

#### 4.1 Macro-system: employment hurdles on the Japanese labor market

While all women are affected by the gendered nature of Japanese working life, foreign workers face further discrimination in career advancement and hiring processes. Although the institutionalized gendered employment system has officially lost its relevance after the Equal Employment and Opportunity Law (*Danjo koyō kikai kintō hō*) was enacted in 1986 and expanded by other legislation directed at facilitation of female labor force participation, the practice of hiring men for positions with more upward mobility has persisted (Liu-Farrer 2009: 41). The wage gap between men and women is still large, gendered career tracks persist, the number of women in managerial positions is small (Schaede 2008: 183). Re-entry into the regular labor market after taking (difficult to obtain) childcare leave remains hard even for highly skilled women (Estévez-Abe 2013: 95–97; Suzuki 2007: 20–23). Japanese companies generally prefer hiring fresh graduates as opposed to mid-career hires (Ono 2007: 270). Tax rules discourage the full-time employment of both spouses, creating incentives for part-time work that is mostly underpaid and offers little job security (Schaede 2008: 183).

Foreign women on the Japanese labor market need to overcome additional obstacles. Japan is officially only targeting the temporary migration of highly skilled workers (Vogt and Achenbach 2012),<sup>8</sup> yet even these internationally wooed professionals struggle to achieve upward mobility. Hurdles for career advancement include impossibilities of human capital transfer “because of Japan’s labor laws, institutional limitations, or other professional barriers” (Liu-Farrer 2007: 186). Two other hurdles that could apply to the sample examined in this study are “institutional discrimination of big business toward foreign employees” and “difficulty in advancing in the internal mobility ladder because

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gendered, as in the migration of nurses (Kingma 2006), which is also a growing topic in the literature on migration to Japan (Ogawa 2012; Vogt and Holdgrün 2012). Another notable exception is Liu-Farrer’s work, which focuses on student migration (2011) and has shown the niches Chinese skilled women occupy in the Japanese labor market (2009).

<sup>8</sup> However, statistics on visa status of foreign residents show that two-thirds of registered foreigners hold long-term visas (MOJ 2013).

of a discriminatory and inflexible career structure” (2007: 187). As foreign workers are often hired in separate career tracks from native workers, namely on a fixed term contract basis, they are also excluded from the institutionalized internal promotion system based on seniority (Ono 2007: 277). Most women in the study agreed with this gloomy description of their career chances in Japanese companies (and reported the same for their Chinese husbands).<sup>9</sup> However, this did not keep most of them from gaining working experience as part of their career strategies (see Section 5.1).

Another issue that might hinder career advancement and work–family balance could be the structure of the Japanese visa system. Chinese highly skilled overwhelmingly come with student visas that are converted to various types of working visas once students have found employment at a Japanese or international company. Visas are granted for limited amounts of time and there can be uncertainty about whether visas will be renewed, especially if the relationship between the employer and the employee has deteriorated. Though none of the women interviewed has experienced serious visa trouble or expressed negative feelings about the visa system, it is not unthinkable that the temporary nature of the visas reinforces the temporary outlook of migrants in Japan in general.<sup>10</sup> However that may be, visa regulations do become a problem when it comes to the compatibility of career in Japan and child and elderly care, because parents of Chinese nationality can only visit their children in Japan for a limited amount of time.

## 4.2 Macro-system: employment hurdles on the Chinese labor market

As of 2012, women in China made up about 44 % of the labor force (ages 15–64) and their labor force participation rate stood at 70 % (The World Bank Group 2013).<sup>11</sup> Remarkably, the majority of them work full-time and with only

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<sup>9</sup> The following quote by a woman who chose transnational entrepreneurship after working in a Japanese company for more than three years exemplifies women’s appraisal of their chances to move up in Japanese companies: “[...] they don’t promote foreigners or women. I used to be with one [company], but they don’t promote us, it has to do with education. It is a traditional old company, so maybe I was just unlucky, but ...” (28 November 2011, Tokyo, in Japanese).

<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, some interviewees reported that they were planning on staying in Japan at least until they could apply for a permanent residency visa to be able to travel visa-free between the two countries after relocating to China.

<sup>11</sup> The same source states that women in Japan made up 42 % of the workforce and that their labor force participation rate was 64 %.

very brief interruptions due to unemployment or childbirth. While Chinese governments have pushed toward high rates of labor force participation and gender equality in urban China, marketization and down-sizing in state-owned companies have led to more difficult working conditions of women since the 1980s. Women face a wage gap on the Chinese labor market as well as discrimination in promotions (Cooke 2010, 2011). The recent rise in university graduates has further aggravated the competition during the job search and women experience additional discrimination in recruitment. Economist Cooke (2011: 269) states that some employers have adopted a policy of only hiring workers with at least two years' working experience. Students and fresh graduates interviewed for the study were acutely aware of this and cited the difficulty to get good positions in China as one reason for coming to Japan to invest in their human capital.

The women interviewed compare the economic and workplace structures in Japan and China and choose a career strategy that best serves their interests. This may include return migration. Though having gained most of their working experience in Japan, returnees did not cite transfer of human capital as a difficulty. This may be due to the fact that most work in transnational businesses where they can use their knowledge of Japanese corporate culture.

### 4.3 Macro-system: gender-role ideology

In addition to economic structures, the macro-level includes life course options, belief systems and ideology that influence women and their options to create work–family balance. In Japan (Ishii-Kuntz 2008) and in China (Cooke 2010), it is still the women who are seen as responsible for elderly and childcare.<sup>12</sup> Although the number of working women during child-bearing years and dual income couples is on the rise in Japan (Fujiwara 2008), in most families men continue to earn higher salaries than their spouses and their careers most often have priority over their wives'.

In China as well it is the norm that the husband's (or the brother's) career takes precedence.<sup>13</sup> Working mothers often rely on grandparents or institution-

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<sup>12</sup> This paper will only focus on aspects of elderly and childcare, even though especially the younger generation cited additional responsibility to make parents proud and happy (for example, by returning early and marrying in China).

<sup>13</sup> This becomes clear in the story of an IT worker in her late 40s, who had been happy with her life in Japan but whose mother insisted on her return. Although her brother works in Beijing half of the year, she alone is in charge of taking care of her elderly mother: "I really didn't want to go back. My mother was the reason, she is too old, she cannot stay in Tokyo, so I promised her I would be back in China in June [...], but I really didn't want to go back,

alized childcare (Cooke 2010, 2011; K. Yang 2013), which greatly facilitate work–family fit.<sup>14</sup> Yet, part of the reason that mothers need to rely on family networks is that there are only few opportunities to work part-time in China and a second income is necessary to make a living (Cooke 2011: 268). Another important factor is filial piety, which is still a social norm in Chinese society.<sup>15</sup> Parents rely on their children, specifically daughters, to take care of them in old age. Elderly care facilities and state-sponsored programs are still insufficient to meet the demands of the elderly population. This, too, influences migration and employment decisions (Giles and Mu 2007).

#### 4.4 From exo-system to micro-system: marriage and motherhood

Women interviewed for this study see marriage as a (potential) source of role conflict. Women assume that Japanese men will be unwilling to go to China, meaning that choosing a Japanese husband includes a choice for a life in Japan. Marriage with a Chinese, on the other hand, is believed to lead to a return to China, as most Chinese men prefer life there (Liu-Farrer 2009: 40) and dislike working in Japanese companies. This constitutes a factor on the exo-level for the women. If the husband insists on return to improve his working life, this may turn into a micro-level factor, namely marital conflict.<sup>16</sup>

While not willing to give up on careers, all women express (anticipated) role conflict associated with motherhood: personal wishes for career and preferred location as opposed to considerations of the well-being of the child. One factor mentioned in the sample is ensuring the best-possible education. Parents

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my mother got mad, at my company they really needed people like me. [...] Now I am not really happy with the work [...] I am not really happy. It's ok. Only for my mother I stay in Beijing [...]" (18 March 2012, Beijing, in Japanese).

<sup>14</sup> According to an interview with a male IT worker in his early thirties who followed his wife to Japan (15 February 2011, Tokyo, in Japanese), couples may even put off having children until their parents retire to assist them with childcare.

<sup>15</sup> As shown by the Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (NPC 2012) that attracted world-wide attention (*China Daily* 2013; Hatton 2013).

<sup>16</sup> One interviewee in her forties, who reluctantly returned to Beijing for her husband and children although she had had a successful IT business in Japan, reported: “My husband, men don't like Japan, I don't know about Germans, but Chinese men don't like it, but Chinese women do, they love it, but men, even after getting the PhD, he decided he wanted to go back, so I had to go back as well, the future was in China, so the children needed to receive Chinese education so they would be able to keep up with the competition once we all went back” (30 March 2012, Beijing, in Japanese).

disagreed on this issue, with many feeling that China provided better formal education. It was also considered important that the child should spend time there to learn the language and form a Chinese identity. By contrast, others feared the competition in China would be too tough on the child.

A second factor is parents' ability to take care of the children (both in terms of time and finances) and their own and the child's emotional needs. This includes the idea that the child should be with the mother. It is an acceptable solution for Chinese mothers to receive help from grandparents raising the child and, in the case of migrants, to accept a temporary separation from the child. However, some women did not include this possibility in their list of potential options to alleviate work–family conflict. They said that the emotional strain on them or on the child would be too hurtful.

## 5 Strategies to achieve work–family balance

As could be seen, Chinese career-oriented women in Japan anticipate and actually experience work–family conflict due to the following issues: in the work realm, they face a lack of upward mobility and long working hours in Japanese companies, leading to dissatisfaction and a lack of time for other activities. In the family realm, they expect difficulties to combine responsibilities toward parents, husband, and children, both in terms of time and role overload. The following section addresses preventive and reactive strategies to alleviate the conflict. Although they are divided into work- and family-related strategies, most affect both sides. As will be seen, Chinese women in Japan are able to compare the economic structures and ideologies surrounding working and family lives in Japan and China. This opens a wider range of options to achieve work–family balance.

### 5.1 Work-related strategies

Obviously, a first strategy adopted by all the women in the sample was moving to Japan in the first place. Whether this was the primary goal or not, it served to escape the unfavorable recruitment system for university graduates in China or to simply ensure higher salaries upon return.<sup>17</sup> Strategies to achieve career

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<sup>17</sup> One student working on her master's degree in business studies says this about her motivation of coming to Japan: "Everyone now, who graduates in Japan and enters a Japanese company, [for that] you need a lot of knowledge, so working here will be the best to gain that knowledge. My goal as well, is of course, to get a well-paying job. Working here is hard, but, because the pay is good, I want to gain working experience in Japan. In China or Hong Kong,

goals include self-employment, employment in international or Japanese companies, choosing work in the transnational economy, and migration. Job switches are a natural part of career strategies for all women in the sample. Each of these will be dealt with in the following.

Choosing international over Japanese companies seems like the obvious choice for foreign women in Japan, who face double discrimination in Japanese working environments. In this study, however, it was neither a popular reactive nor a common preventive choice. Gaining experience in Japanese companies was given as one of the main reasons for coming to Japan, hoping to cash in on the skills (technical skills as well as knowledge of Japanese corporate culture) upon return to China. For a limited amount of time, the benefits for women who plan on returning to China or gaining knowledge crucial to founding a company outweigh the negative implications of working temporarily at a Japanese company. Employment at a Japanese company is most often a preventive strategy to build a good career in China and job switches are a natural part of this strategy. Only few women and only those with temporary plans in Japan explicitly state to search for international companies. Their reasons include: work contents, atmosphere, salary, and upward mobility.

Not all of the women who enter Japanese companies find their fears of overly demanding working conditions confirmed: 22 of the 33 women with working experience have worked for Japanese companies. Eleven still do so, while 7 quit after relocating for family reasons; only 4 did so due to dissatisfaction with upward mobility. Those that left for family reasons had gained comparatively high positions within the companies that fit their career goals. Most childless women employed at Japanese companies at the time of the interview feel confident about further promotions. They enter the company with temporary intentions but grow to like it and plan on staying longer. Therefore, the majority of those who have worked for Japanese employers are satisfied with their working lives. Women adopt the reactive strategy of switching jobs to alleviate dissatisfaction with working conditions, but, more often, to ease family demands and ensure role-fulfillment in the family realm.<sup>18</sup> Of those that are dissatisfied with working conditions, most choose self-employment over employment at international companies.

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if you have working experience [in Japan], you get higher salaries, so I want to gain experience in Japan, and then [...] I want to switch jobs" (25 January 2011, Tokyo, in English).

**18** Twenty women in the sample had switched jobs at least once in their careers. Seven of these switched as they had to move for family reasons, 4 moved to China for a job better suited to their interests, 5 to ensure more interesting work contents in Japan, 4 to achieve more upward mobility.

The choice for self-employment can be seen as a way to gain flexibility at work and meet family demands (Diamond and Schaeede 2013: 9; Powell 2011: 196). Yet while this may be a welcome side effect, the women examined in the study choose self-employment mainly for other reasons. One woman founded her own company out of negative experiences at Japanese companies, for reasons of upward mobility, and to be able to choose work contents freely. Her business is transnational and has offices in both countries. Another one quit her job at a small company after childbirth and started her own company with the aid of familial and Japanese contacts. For her, choosing work contents freely was also a main reason to choose self-employment. After returning to Beijing, she successfully founded another company with mostly Japanese customers. A third participant founded her own company due to disillusionment about upward mobility after gaining working experience in Japanese and international companies.<sup>19</sup>

All three entrepreneurs thus founded their companies as strategies to battle against negative experiences with Japanese company life: new possibilities to choose work contents freely for all of them, previous lack of upward mobility for two of them, and the prospect to better combine childcare and a career for the third one. The first one does not cite family considerations as a factor in her decision to found a company, yet after the birth of her first child she reluctantly chose to follow her husband to China, where she can continue her work at the Beijing office. All of the women when founding their companies were planning on staying in Japan long term. They consciously made the choice to fit their working lives to their decision of working in Japan while circumventing negative career expectations within Japanese companies. It is unclear whether self-employment is a reactive or a preventive choice here. The three women had gained working experience in Japanese companies and chose to found their companies later in their careers. It might well be that the disappointment in Japanese companies gave them the idea, but it is also possible that they wanted to gain working experiences to understand Japanese business practices first, with the intention of self-employment later on.

The booming trade relations and Foreign Direct Investment between Japan and China have created a niche for workers of bicultural knowledge. Unlike in the studies of Liu-Farrer (2009, 2011), however, only very few of the participants in this study seek employment directly in the transnational economy while still

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<sup>19</sup> Her conclusion: “[Name of Japanese branch of the international company], it is just a Japanese company. So I stayed here for over 10 years, but I never see [that] a foreigner can be a manager in a company, they will all leave” (10 September 2011, Tokyo, in English).

in Japan. Yet most of them use the skills acquired in Japan when founding their own company or after their return to China.

Moving back is naturally part of the long-term plan of most women in the sample, as the majority came to Japan with temporary plans. Overall, younger members of the sample with no or little working experience see better chances of upward mobility, more potential to use all their skills, and better compatibility of work and family in China. Older members of the sample have created working conditions for themselves to overcome hurdles on the Japanese labor market – for them, migration is more often a privately induced strategy, as will be shown in the next section.<sup>20</sup>

## 5.2 Family-related strategies

Strategies to combine career with marriage naturally differ between single and married women. Forty-nine of the women interviewed see their (future) lives including a husband and children. Only one interviewee said that her career was her first priority, while two wanted to get married in the future but did not want children. Single women anticipate conflict in choices of location and therefore consciously make a choice against Japanese husbands. Many unmarried women foresee that Japanese husbands will not go to China with them. Instead, they plan on finding a Chinese spouse upon return to China.<sup>21</sup> These women thus use preventive strategies and choose to avoid anticipated role conflict by delaying the life goal of “marriage” and prioritizing careers.

All interviewees who were married to Japanese men plan on staying in Japan; for them marriage does not hinder their labor market participation.<sup>22</sup> Women married to Chinese also remain in the labor market, yet some compromise on where they work. All but one expect to return to China in the future. In most cases, men push toward a return to China, but until the birth of children, women are largely successful in negotiating the time frame. In a few

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**20** This is likely the result of sampling bias – women were interviewed in Japan to analyze best-practice approaches of highly skilled Chinese to achieve work–family balance, therefore the sampling choices led to an over-representation of success stories in Japan. Only 11 returnees are included in this study.

**21** As one engineering student explained: “Now, I have a Japanese boyfriend, but ... I want to return in the future, so ... he ... I will break up with him and will return to China and marry a Chinese guy, I think. My boyfriend doesn’t speak Chinese, my parents also don’t speak Japanese, so ...” (24 February 2011, Tokyo, in Japanese).

**22** This, too, is naturally a result of sampling bias as no women who left the labor market were interviewed.

cases, the husband returned earlier and women stay in Japan until they find an acceptable solution. Consistent with the model, the exo-factor of a husband's dissatisfaction at work turns into a micro-factor of marital conflict. Women's strategies to eventually follow the husband fit gender-role ideology as explained by Cooke (2011: 270): a man's career usually takes precedence and women are responsible for childcare.

Reproductive choices include decisions to forego or delay having children, but also separation of the family for a limited amount of time. For the women married to Japanese men, children receive education in Japan and the family stays together.<sup>23</sup> Some women married to Chinese men rule out having children while in Japan, as they see supportive programs for working mothers as insufficient and want support from their parents in China. Models of family separation consist of the child spending time with the grandparents in China (often when in elementary school age), which Philip Q. Yang (2013: 132) termed "reverse parachute-kid families," or one spouse moving back with the child to continue work from China. Reasons are not limited to time constraints of dual-income parents, but also include the wish to foster a Chinese identity in the child and ensure good Chinese language skills.<sup>24</sup> For some families in the sample the Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March 2011, and especially the uncertainty surrounding radiation, led to separations from children and earlier returns to China.

How to take care of aging parents in the future turned out to be one of the most troubling questions. Of the 52 women interviewed, 39 plan on taking care of their parents when these get older. Ten of the remaining 13 rely on siblings to take care. Most interviewees acknowledge that they will have to care for their parents personally by bringing them to live with them or moving back for a limited amount of time. If they consider moving, they plan on a temporary separation of the family, to have one spouse continue regular work to support the family. Some claim they will move their parents to Japan, but most explain that restrictive visa policies, lack of Chinese-language care facilities, parents' deep-seated sentiments against Japan, and missing integration make that option unlikely.

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**23** These women took maternal leave but returned to their jobs soon after childbirth. They relied on state or company sponsored childcare facilities and on privately paid childcare.

**24** "My husband has returned for a bit, he wants to speak Chinese all the time also for our child. He doesn't want our child to become Japanese. [...] He doesn't want our child to feel Japanese, he wants Chinese education for the child" (28 November 2011, Tokyo, in Japanese).

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

The strategies described above differ with professional and personal life stage of the interviewees. Participants are aware of the difficulties of making a career both in the Japanese and the Chinese labor market. Early in their careers, they choose to move to Japan temporarily to evade difficulties on the Chinese labor market: they come to obtain an education, to gain working experience, to invest in their human capital, and increase their salaries. Return migration is a natural part of this strategy, yet some decide to stay longer than originally planned. Interviewees of all life stages successfully adopt preventive and reactive strategies to circumvent the specific hurdles of the Japanese labor market. These strategies include job switches, occupation in international companies or in a niche, where they can use their expertise to build a career in Japanese companies or in self-employment. Some hurdles to career advancement in Japanese corporations are not perceived as harsh, due to the initial goal of learning about Japanese corporate culture for a limited amount of time as an investment in human capital. Young women seeking to stay in Japan long term take up employment at international companies as a preventive strategy convinced that they can build better careers there. More often, however, it is mid-career women who had to move for family reasons that choose international companies as a reactive strategy to counter the difficulties of mid-career switches in Japanese companies. All in all, the women examined are quite successful in overcoming both micro-level workplace issues and the macro-level constraints of the Japanese and Chinese labor markets and gender-role ideology in the professional sphere.

The picture looks different when the women experience heightened demands in their family lives, which forms part of their micro-system and may lead to family conflict: ageing parents pushing for return, husbands deciding where to live, and children’s “best” interests (that may contradict the mother’s private or professional interests). In order to avoid family–work negative spillover, women adopt *preventive* strategies with regard to delaying private life goals, choice of partner, or earlier return to China to build a career there. As only few women compromise in the energy they invest in their careers, they need to change aspects in the family realm or switch to a location that promises better compatibility with family responsibilities. These are *reactive* strategies, including moving to China to appease the husband, receive help with childcare from parents, or provide elderly care. Family separation is also acceptable for a limited amount of time, but this comes at an emotional cost. Although women quickly found solutions to counter family–work negative spillover, many prioritized their roles of mother, wife, and daughter even if this led to actions contra-

ry to their personal and professional wishes. The gender-role ideology in the private sphere sets boundaries women are often unable to cross.

Therefore, moving back to China, possibly employed in the transnational economy, is the preferred strategy for the women in the sample to combine work and family overall.<sup>25</sup> China provides secure social networks to aid in childcare, marriage with a Chinese is seen as the easiest way to combine family and career goals, and the Chinese economy offers enough opportunities for highly skilled women of transnational expertise.

While the geographically and culturally torn nature of the lives of Chinese women in Japan poses additional challenges when family responsibilities are added to successful careers, transnational expertise and networks offer additional solution strategies. Geographical separation from husband and children, while tough on the women emotionally, is culturally and socially acceptable. The transnational expertise they develop also aids them in their working lives, by creating niches in Japanese and self-owned companies or by easing the transition to the Chinese labor market. Women are therefore able to overcome structural hurdles set by the Japanese and Chinese labor markets and the gender-role ideology in the professional sphere. However, with rising family responsibilities they succumb to that very gender-role ideology in the private sphere. In order to avoid work–family misfit, they prioritize the roles of mother, daughter, and wife. Restrictive visa policies for parental visits, insufficient childcare provisions, and the inability to overcome paternalistic structures in the private realm constitute factors that impair highly skilled Chinese women's options for work–family balance. Returning to China, and thus extracting crucial talent from the Japanese labor market, is the consequence.

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<sup>25</sup> Exceptions are women who are married to Japanese husbands or those whose parents also reside in Japan.

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