

# **The way to entrepreneurship: female entrepreneurs' education and work experience in Jiaocheng County, Shanxi Province, the People's Republic of China<sup>1</sup>**

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**The workshop of a private clothes factory in Jiaocheng**

This paper examines the education background and work history of a newly emerged group of entrepreneurs in the People's Republic of China (PRC)—women.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank David S.G. Goodman, Elaine Jeffreys, and the two anonymous reviewers of *PORTAL*, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The findings in this paper are part of a larger project, *China's Invisible Economic Leadership: Women in Family Enterprises*, funded by the Australia Research Council, which analyzes the social development and

Understandably, those who study women in China would desire to reach a conclusive picture of the overall situation of women's status in this country. However, considering China's geographic vastness, the enormous population and the unequal economic development between the North and the South, the mountainous and coastal areas, different provinces and even different regional areas within one province, such a conclusion seems to be impossible to achieve. Moreover, the rapid economic development in the reform era adds to the complex situation. Available literature on the educational background of female entrepreneurs in the PRC offers a contradictory picture. A survey conducted by the China Female entrepreneurs Association between 1996 and 2001 claims that 55.8 percent of female entrepreneurs had received a college or university education ('Zhongguo Nü Qiyejia: Weishenme Tamen Geng Rongyi Chenggong', 2003). Augmenting the suggestion that education has contributed to female entrepreneurial success, research on Chinese women executives conducted by the Guanghua School of Management, at Beijing University, states that more than 90 percent had attended college or university (Guanghua School of Management, 2006). However, a survey on female entrepreneurs in Nanjing City, conducted by a branch of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in Gulou District, suggests that only 17.5 percent of their respondents had received a college education and none had been to university (Zhu Minyi, 1994). Hence, it is difficult to ascertain from the existing literature whether the educational background of the surveyed group of women contributed to their success as entrepreneurs or not.

Accounts of the professional background of female entrepreneurs in the PRC provide an equally contradictory picture. Karen Korabik (1994) maintains that 'most Chinese women who are currently managers have backgrounds in science, accounting, politics, or engineering'. In contrast, a survey conducted by the China Female entrepreneurs Association contends that 53 percent of Chinese female entrepreneurs have a background in finance and management, and 31.4 percent in science ('Zhongguo Nü Qiyejia: Weishenme Tamen Geng Rongyi Chenggong', 2003). Thus, existing scholarship provides neither a detailed profile of the educational background and work history of

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the role of women in that process in Shanxi Province, Hainan Province and Sichuan Province, PRC.

female entrepreneurs in China today, nor an adequate assessment of whether a higher education and professional background is a necessary component of their path to entrepreneurship.

This paper sheds further light on the way to entrepreneurship for women in China by examining the education background and work experience of 62 private female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng County, Shanxi Province. It is based on interviews conducted between October 2003 and May 2004. Twenty-seven women were private enterprise owners, twenty-seven were wives of private enterprise owners, and eight other women were working in private enterprises as managers, workshop leaders, shareholders or de facto managers. Private female entrepreneurs are defined as women enterprise owner-operators, wives of enterprise owner-operators who, while not being the designated entrepreneurs (a role assigned to their husbands), are still active in the enterprises' operation, as well as other women playing a leading role in private enterprises as managers, workshop leaders, shareholders or de facto managers. The interviewees were identified with the help of local government officials and members of the ACWF, an organization that was founded by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, and which is charged with the task of advancing the position of Chinese women. The interviewees were asked about their place and date of birth, their highest level of education, and their work experience, as well as information about their families. Their enterprises varied from shops with capital of 50,000-60,000 *yuan* and three employees, to larger enterprise groups with capital of 120 million *yuan* and 2,000 employees. Their diverse businesses covered cosmetics, fashion, building materials, glass crafts, food, cloth, studio work, stationery and gifts, jade carving, steel casting, coal and coke production, magnesian alloy production, hotel operation, department-store management, breeding farms, motorcycle sales, brick manufacturing, supermarkets and pharmacy development. The results suggest that higher education is not an important element in the making of these female entrepreneurs, but literacy still matters for those who are seeking higher positions in private enterprises or setting up their own business. The interviewees' work experience corresponds to their education background, as most of them used to be engaged in jobs requiring less education.

### **Research locale and interviewees: female entrepreneurs in economic-reform China and Jiaocheng County, Shanxi Province**

Why study the education background and work experience of female entrepreneurs in China? One answer is that the pattern of women's employment has followed and helps to illuminate wider trends of social change in the PRC. China's reform policy since the late 1970s has drawn global attention to the biggest existing communist country in the world. Ever since Deng Xiaoping (1994) pointed out that a market economy could exist within the communist state, the planned economy has gradually given way to a market economy, although bureaucratic influences on the economy continue to be strong. By the end of 2001, the private sector had become a significant part of the Chinese economy, making up six percent of domestic gross output value and contributing 11 percent to domestic employment (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2002, 117).

With the PRC's opening-up to the outside world, the secondary and tertiary industry sectors of its economy are developing faster and thus more employment has been created. As a result, increasingly more women are employed in non-agricultural activities. As their education levels have improved with the introduction of educational reform, more women are working in technical occupations and some are even taking leadership positions. Nowadays, in trades requiring specialist technology and knowledge, such as computer science, communication, engineering, design, finance, and so on, the number of women employed is five to ten times more than that before the introduction of the economic reforms ('Funü Jiuye', 2004).

Some women have even taken advantage of the economic reforms to set up their own business. At present, 20 percent of China's entrepreneurs are women ('Funü Jiuye', 2004) and the China Association of Female entrepreneurs has 34 subordinate provincial and city level associations and as many as 7,000 outstanding female entrepreneurs as members (<http://www.cawe.org.cn/index.html>, accessed on 06 April 2006). According to *The People's Daily*, the official media voice of the central Chinese Government, among the female labour force in China today, approximately 20 million are enterprise owners or

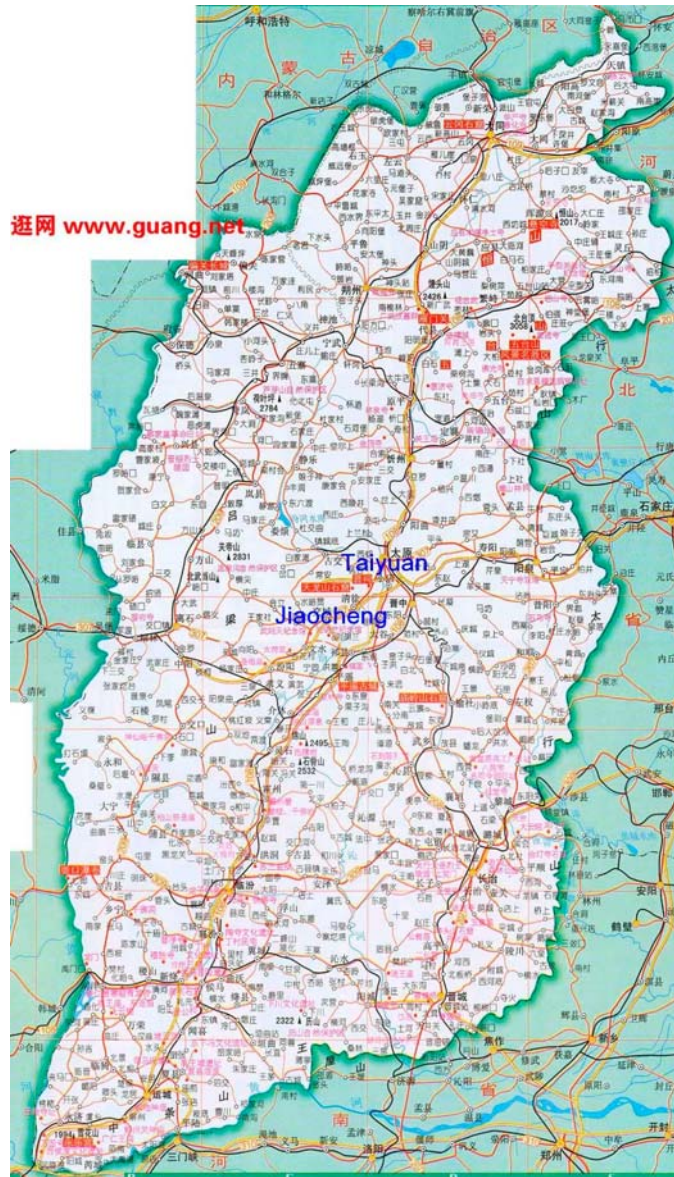
juridical persons and an impressive 98.5 percent of their enterprises are making a profit ('Nüxing Huati Xilie Fangtan: Chenggong Nüxing', 2004).

This paper seeks to draw a broader picture of the way to entrepreneurship for women in China by examining the age, education, and work experience of 62 female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng County, Shanxi Province—an area that is characterized by both urban and rural development, and by a history of strong Party-state influence, yet strong growth of private enterprise in the reform era. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, Shanxi Province developed under the influence of party-state controls, not least because it played a significant part in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) success in the Anti-Japanese War. In 1937, while Japan had occupied North and Central China and the Kuomintang Government had retreated to the interior and set up a capital at Chongqing, the CCP remained active in their base areas in the vast Chinese countryside. The Party had a stronger control in Shanxi, as it was included in three (Jin-Cha-Ji, Jin-Sui and Jin-Ji-Lu-Yu) of the eight major CCP base areas ('Kangri Zhanzheng Zhuyao Genjudi', 2003). The province was also the base of one of the most elite CCP military troops at that time, the 129<sup>th</sup> Division led by Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping that was known as the Liu and Deng Troop (Goodman, 2000).



**Map 1: China**

Apart from its historic links to the CCP, Shanxi is famous for its coal reserves, which are buried under about 40 percent of its area, counting for one-third of China's whole coal reserves ('Meitan Ziyuan', accessed on 03 Oct 2004). More than 80 percent of cities and counties in Shanxi are coal producers. Consequently, from the 1950s onwards, the province was developed by the central state as its heavy industry base for coal and power (Goodman, 1999). As a result, the province's economy has been characterized by strict central control and planning for almost 50 years. In the early 1980s, Shanxi was the biggest coal producer and one of the biggest electricity producers in China—nowadays, 70 percent of China's coal exportation is still contributed by Shanxi ('Shanxi Meitan Gongye Gaishu', accessed on 13 July 2006), and it also has one of the country's most advanced steel factories. Until recently (1992) most of its industry was state-owned and the private sector was underdeveloped. By the end of 2001, the non-public sector counted for nine percent of the province's economy—15 percent less than the national average. By 2001, the province's GDP was about 178 billion *yuan*, ranked twenty-second among China's 31 provinces and municipalities ('Mei Zhai Fu Zhang', accessed on 26 March 2004).



**Map 2: Shanxi**

Jiaocheng County, consisting of nine townships under the jurisdiction of Lüliang City, is the least economically developed district of Shanxi Province, although Jiaocheng itself is located near the richest city of the province—the provincial capital, Taiyuan. A highway built in 2003 links Jiaocheng and Taiyuan, which are about 20 minutes' drive apart. Located on the eastern side of the Lüliang Mountains and the western edge of the Taiyuan Basin, Jiaocheng's land areas include both a mountainous area (92.8 percent) and a plain area (7.2 percent) (*Jiaocheng Xianzhi* 1994: 2). Unsurprisingly, the



mountainous area is less developed, while the plain area is the county's agricultural and industrial centre, as wealthy as the rest of the Taiyuan Basin. The county has resources of coal and iron and has developed its industry accordingly. My research looks at enterprises at county level: an administrative level between city and township, which thus is expected to combine the features of urban and rural area.

Before undertaking interviews in Jiaocheng in 2003, I assumed that the county's economy would be dominated by the state-owned sector, not least because of its historical close ties to the party-state. However, to my surprise, it turned out that the county's industry is almost completely non-state-owned. Actually, even as early as 1985, only 22.74 percent of the county's industry was owned by the state, while a majority of 64.84 percent was collectively owned (*Jiaocheng Xianzhi* 1994:172). By 1995, when ownership reform took place in the county, two thirds of its industry was already privately owned. Currently, according to the Director of the Jiaocheng Enterprise Administration Centre (Personal Interview, 18 May 2004), more than four-fifths of Jiaocheng's enterprises are private. The only exceptions are the county's tobacco company, oil company and running water company, which are state-owned instead. The high profits brought by tobacco production ensure the country government's revenue, while water and oil are resources crucial to the country's economic production. Thus, understandably, the state maintains control over aspects of the economy that are regarded as more crucial to either its own income or security.

### **Female entrepreneurs' age**

Women's education and employment in China closely follows wider trends of social change. On the one hand, following the country's reform and opening-up, education has become more widespread and more affordable in China and the significance of education is increasingly emphasized both by individuals and society in general. On the other hand, the state has loosened its control over employment and population flows. Consequently, it would be reasonable to expect that older and younger generations of female entrepreneurs will have different educational backgrounds and work experience. To test this hypothesis, as part of the interviews conducted with 62 private female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng



County, Shanxi Province between October 2003 and May 2004, interviewees were asked to reveal their age in order to provide a more comprehensive profile of this particular group of female entrepreneurs.

The respective ages of the 62 female entrepreneurs interviewed in Jiaocheng County are depicted in Table 1. Eighty-point-six percent of the total number of interviewees was under the age of 50 at the time of interview, with the youngest being 31, and the oldest being 58. The majority of these women (43.5 percent) were between 40 and 49 years of age, with a slightly smaller proportion (37.1 percent) being between 30 and 39 years of age. The average age of the interviewees was 42.8 years.

**Table 1: Jiaocheng female entrepreneurs: age at the end of 2004**

	30-39	40-49	50-	Average age at the end of 2004
<b>Wives of enterprise owner-operators</b>	10	10	7	43
<b>Women enterprise owner-operators</b>	12	11	4	41.5
<b>Women leaders</b>	1	6	1	42.4
<b>Total</b>	23 (37.1%)	27 (43.5%)	12 (19.4%)	42.8

Although the respective average ages of the three groups of interviewees (namely wives of enterprise owner-operators, women enterprise owner-operators and other women working in private enterprises as leaders) were close to each other, women enterprise owner-operators were comparatively younger than the other two groups. Forty-four-point-four percent of women enterprise owner-operators were under the age of 40 and 40.7 percent were between 40 and 49, both percentages higher than those of the other two groups of women. This statistic suggests that women are starting to become entrepreneurs at a relatively early age.

### **Education backgrounds of female entrepreneurs**

Does education play an important role in the making of Chinese female entrepreneurs? Do women need an excellent educational background to be able to set up and run their own business? In cosmopolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, higher education is

more likely a necessity, as more university graduates go to these places to seek opportunities and thus there is more severe competition. However, interview results from female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng County tell a different story. They suggest that higher education is not an important element in the making of these female entrepreneurs, as only a small percentage of the interviewees had been to junior college or university. However, literacy does matter when women look for leading positions in private enterprises or set up their own business.

During the interviews, female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng County were asked about the highest education they had received. Since 1986, the Chinese Government has pursued a Nine-Year Compulsory Education Policy and people having completed nine years of education are considered to be equipped with the basic literacy required to seek employment. As is shown in Table 2, 11.3 percent of the female entrepreneurs interviewed in Jiaocheng County did not possess this basic level of literacy, having only completed primary school or else dropped out of junior middle school. Nearly half of the female entrepreneurs interviewed in Jiaocheng County (48.3 percent) had received education at a higher level than the compulsory schooling, but 41.9 percent of them had only been to senior middle school or secondary technical school. Among the four women with higher education backgrounds, three had finished junior college through the provincial Party school by correspondence. Only one of the 62 interviewees had passed the entrance examination to university and completed the four years of formal university education.

**Table 2. Jiaocheng female entrepreneurs: age and education**

	< Junior middle school	Junior middle school	High school	Secondary school	College	University
<b>30-39</b>	1	10	8	3	1	--
<b>40-49</b>	3	9	10	4	--	1
<b>50-</b>	3	6	1	--	2	--
	<b>7</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>(11.3%)</b>	<b>(40.3%)</b>	<b>(30.6%)</b>	<b>(11.3%)</b>	<b>(4.8%)</b>	<b>(1.6%)</b>

Table 2 details the education background of the female entrepreneurs by three age groups (30-39, 40-49 and above 50). It is reasonable to assume that the younger generation of

female entrepreneurs must have been better educated than the older, as both socially and individually there is increasing emphasis on the significance of education nowadays. The interview results partly support this view, as the interviewees above 50 years' old turned out to have the biggest percentage without the basic literacy and the smallest percentage with senior middle school or higher education. However, the youngest group of female entrepreneurs was not better educated than those between the ages of 40 and 49. Though a smaller proportion of the former had not finished compulsory schooling (4.3 percent and 11.1 percent respectively), the percentage with an education higher than junior middle school is smaller than the latter as well (52.1 percent and 55.6 percent respectively).

There are two possible explanations for the overall low education level of female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng County. First, young people nowadays, after finishing higher education, tend to seek work opportunities in the better-developed areas of China such as the four municipalities (which are Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing) or the rich Southeast coast area or at least the provincial capital Taiyuan, instead of staying in their native county of Jiaocheng. Secondly, about a decade ago the state-government's policy regulating the population floating was much stricter and students were still assigned employment upon graduation, which limited the mobility of the better-educated women of the 40-49 generation.

**Table 3. Jiaocheng female entrepreneurs: educational background**

	< Junior middle school	Junior middle school	High school	Secondary school	College	University
<b>Wives of enterprise owner- operators</b>	3 (11.1%)	14 (51.9%)	7 (25.9%)	2 (7.4%)	1 (3.7%)	--
<b>Women enterprise owner- operators</b>	4 (14.8%)	9 (33.3%)	9 (33.3%)	4 (14.8%)	1 (3.7%)	--
<b>Women leaders</b>	--	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)

Table 3 lists the education background of the three groups of wives of enterprise owner-operators, women enterprise owner-operators and other women playing leading roles in enterprises. Women leaders are the best-educated group, as all of them are equipped with the basic literacy of junior middle schooling. And this group has the largest proportion with senior middle school or secondary technical school education (50 percent) and the largest proportion with higher education (25 percent). Women enterprise owner-operators, though not as well educated, were nevertheless more literate than the wives of enterprise owner-operators, as a significantly higher percentage of the former (51.8 percent) had finished their formal after junior middle school education, compared to the latter (37 percent).

The interview results indicate that higher education is not an important element on these women's way to entrepreneurship, as only a small percentage of the interviewees had been to junior college or university. However, literacy does matter when women look for leading positions in private enterprises or set up their own businesses.

### **Work experience of female entrepreneurs**

Table 4 shows the varied occupation background of the Jiaocheng interviewees before they started to work in the enterprises. As is detailed in the table, while the biggest proportion (41.9 percent) used to be blue-collar labourers, only 20.8 percent had been employed in the comparatively white-collar jobs of storage keeper, accountant, cashier, teacher, government clerk or official. The rest had been working as peasant/housewife, opera singer, waitress, or shop assistant, none of which requires a good educational background. This also contributes to the overall low education level of these women, and restricts them seeking employment in more professional jobs. Comparing the three groups, the best-educated women leaders occupied white-collar positions (50 percent) and the least educated, the wives of enterprise owner-operators, had the highest percentage with a manual labour background (48.1 percent) and peasant/housewife background (16.1 percent).

Table 4. Jiaocheng female entrepreneurs: work experience

	Peasant /house-wife	Factory worker	Opera singer	Waitress	Shop assistant	Storage keeper	Accountant /cashier	Teacher	Gov. clerk /official	Other
Wives of enterprise owner-operators	6	13	1	--	2	1	1	1	2	--
Female enterprise owner-operators	4	9	--	1	6	--	--	1	3	3
Female leaders	--	4	--	--	--	--	1	1	2	--
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>

Li, the only interviewee with a university background, majored in stockbreeding. After graduation in 1982, she was assigned to work in one of Jiaocheng's government departments. After several transfers, she was promoted to be the vice-director of another department in 1998. Not long before the promotion, Li set up a private chicken farm, which was registered in the name of Li's father-in-law, as she and her husband both had government positions. Though nowadays private entrepreneurs are allowed to join the Party, they are not allowed to take positions in government departments. However, Li was the de facto farm manager. Another interviewee, Tian, started to work in the fields after finishing her junior-middle-school education. After getting married and moving to the county town, she stayed at home doing housework and looking after her working husband and five children, born over nine years. When her husband set up his enterprise in 1994, Tian left home to work in the enterprise. Now Tian is the second ranking leader (the first being her husband) and chief financial officer of the group with a capital of 120 million yuan.

### Widowed female entrepreneurs: a difficult way to entrepreneurship

There is a commonly heard phrase, 'behind every successful man, you can always find a woman.' The interviews with female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng County suggest that

behind every one of these successful women, there is always a man to be found. Fifty-six out of the 61 interviewees were married. The rest of them were either divorced or widowed (which suggests they all married at some time). When asked about their husbands and their activities, these women suggested that husbands might 'help me with housework', 'cook for me', 'we make decision in business together', 'we never quarrel', 'when I encounter difficulty in work, I go to him for help', or 'when there are different opinions, the one who is more reasonable makes the decision.'

Despite the majority of happy wives, there were several single female entrepreneurs who were running their enterprises alone without the backing of a helpful man. Among them, three used to be wives behind their entrepreneur husbands. After the death of their husbands, these women had no choice but to take over the enterprises and enter into business on their own. They were owner-operators of a steel factory, a brick factory and a repair shop respectively, none of which is viewed as a 'womanish' trade in their part of the world. These women recalled their husbands' death, the initial difficulties in entering an unknown business, and the inconvenience of being a businesswoman, with tears.

Zhang took over her husband's steel casting factory after he died of liver cancer in 1995. 'In the first several years without my husband, I was all in a flutter. Whenever I saw people, I wanted to cry.' Despite the sadness and nerves, she managed to develop the enterprise from a factory with 300,000 *yuan* capital into one with 1 million *yuan* fixed assets and 1 million *yuan* circulating fund. Zhang talked in an articulate and straightforward way, because 'I am forced to behave like this.'

When talking about her husband, Jia could not keep from crying. After he died in a car accident, Jia was left with her husband's brick factory in 1999, when she 'didn't know anything and had to completely depend on people's help'. Nonetheless, the enterprise from an initial capital of 200,000 turned into a fixed capital of more than 500,000 *yuan* and a circulation capital of 30,000~40,000 *yuan* under Jia's management.

Another widowed entrepreneur, Liu, used to stay at home, while her husband was operating an automobile repair factory. Her husband's death in 2002 forced her into the business. Liu indicated that the factory was not as profitable in her hands as before her husband's death. 'Sometimes I cry alone, but I still have to solve the problem myself.' Not long before being interviewed, Liu bought into a restaurant and a second-hand tip truck in the hope that the two new businesses could turn more of a profit.

The three widows invariably talked about the inconvenience and difficulty they encountered after their husbands' death. Zhang said, 'it is not easy for a single woman to do business outside [i.e., in the public (male) world]. I can't entertain people at dinner table by drinking, so I can't help but pay more money than others...It's so difficult for women to do things alone.' Jia expressed a similar opinion. She said, 'I don't drink and don't want to entertain people, so it is difficult for me to do things. And when I first took over the business, people looked down upon me as I was a widow.' Liu admitted that she never felt any difficulty before her husband's death. But when she started to do the business, she found innumerable difficulties in her way. As a widow, she became the target of personal slander and gossip. Moreover, in what is supposed to be an economic environment characterized by fair competition, she was often treated unfairly. Compared with others, these widowed women are taking a tough road to entrepreneurship.

### **Conclusion**

Though the 2003-04 interviews with 62 female entrepreneurs in Jiaocheng County drew on women aged in their 30s, 40s and 50s, most interviewees were under the age of 50. The interview results suggest that higher education is not an important element in the making of these female entrepreneurs, as a great proportion of them were barely equipped with basic literacy and few had received higher education. However, literacy still matters for women seeking higher positions in private enterprises or setting up their own business. It is additionally worth noticing that the younger group of female entrepreneurs were not better educated than the older, which might be the result of the improving mobility of contemporary Chinese society enabling well-educated youth to look for opportunities in the well-off areas.



These female entrepreneurs' work experiences correspond with their educational background. Limited by their education level, most of the interviewees used to be engaged in jobs requiring less literacy. The more literate interviewees clearly were more likely to have had a white-collar background.

One specific group formed by the experience of becoming entrepreneurs is suggested by the interviews and examined in this paper. Where widowed women took over their husbands' enterprises after their death it is clear that they had experienced considerable hardship in running the business without their husbands behind them.

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