


THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE IN CHINA

BY **Catherine Lo** Assistant Director, MSc Programs at HKUST Business School,
with commentary from **Summer Tang** CEMS alumna and Management
Associate at Hilti (China) Distribution Ltd

Chinese workplace culture has been evolving, as in many parts of the world. One area in which there has been a unique growth is in the number of opportunities that are becoming available to women





"In most of the first-tier cities, the age to get married and start a family is getting later and later, women supposedly have greater opportunities than ever before. Yet, China has labeled those who fail to get married by the time they are 27 as the "left-over" women, which might be quite shocking for people from other cultures"

Within the CEMS MIM Program, Chinese students have rapidly become the third largest cultural group and this is led mainly by women. Despite this great news, there are still many cultural barriers women in China will have to break through in their climb to the top.

The corporate culture in Mainland China varies, depending on the type of organisation (state-owned enterprise, multi-national corporations, or private small businesses, etc.), but still the vast majority remains a hierarchical structure, which is mainly seen in state-owned enterprises. Seniority is also highly valued. Subordinates respect their superiors because the seniors might have more experience and thus their views cannot be challenged. Additionally, promotions are mainly based on the number of years a person has been working in the field or company, with less consideration being put on performance. Currently, there are very few women leaders in the corporate world or within the government in Mainland China. It has been quite difficult for women to climb up the career ladder, given the family burden and the traditional view towards Chinese women.

Under the traditional Chinese culture, older generations still believe that women do not need higher education because their responsibility is to take care of the family. Women are expected to get married early, typically in their early 20s and have babies before their 30s, in order to carry on the family heritage. After that, women are expected to stay at home to take care of the children and accomplish household chores.

"In most of the first-tier cities, the age to get married and start a family is getting later and later," says Summer Tang, a CEMS alumna and Management Associate at Hilti (China) Distribution Ltd. "With the current mature environment for female employment, women supposedly have greater opportunities than ever before. Yet, China has labeled those who fail to get married by the time they are 27 as the "left-over" women, which might be quite shocking for people from other cultures. While the number of educated and professional urban females is growing, there is also a growing number of women aged 25-29 who are still unmarried. The achievement and recognition we gain from work definitely balances, or even outweighs, the pressure of being "left over".

Yet, this is the paradox, the more successful a woman is, the more difficult it is for her to get married. It is considered as 'stealing' the husband's job or thunder, and if the successful woman does not find someone who is more prosperous than her, she makes her spouse lose face. With the deep-rooted mindset, as deep as 5,000 years of history, perspectives like this will take ages to change. It then requires these successful working women to develop stronger and stronger will to face the traditional cultural and societal judgment, and at the same time, carve their own career path."

Better education and broader exposure for women today is helping to change this mindset. For some multinational corporations in China, they might even prefer to hire women to balance gender diversity in the workplace, if the male and female candidates possess the same qualities. Ms. Tang agrees, "Many Multinational Corporations in China have realised the importance of "Diversity and Inclusion". For example, although the construction industry in its nature is less attractive to women, companies in this sector have started making significant progress in recruitment by offering flexible career models, establishing structures for dual career couples and raising awareness and support for women in leadership.

The great economic boom as China shifts towards the service economy has also been favorable towards increasing the number of women in the workforce. In fact, the female employment rate in China rose as high as 73% this year and in 2015, Chinese female entrepreneurs rose to a ratio of 25% of the total population. This shift to the service economy also puts an emphasis on new skill sets where women might be more likely to excel, like effective communication."

The CEMS MIM program is designed in many ways for students to have international exposure and global perspectives, and also polish their essential soft skills like communication, presentation and interpersonal skills. There are more female students enrolled in the pre-experience masters programs and the opportunities offered in the program can help the female students build a solid foundation before they start their career. So when they graduate and enter the workplace, they may show stronger competencies and can provide broader perspectives as compared with their counterparts. This can help them become more competitive and to progress early in their career much faster than the traditional route.

Ms. Tang, for example, has been assigned as a Business Development Manager of Industrial Segment at Hilti, just 2 years after graduating

from the CEMS program at HKUST. She says the program, through its exposure to the Business Project working with Hilti, directly resulted in her employment with them. She also credits the business case studies, presentations combined with the skill seminars and courses as giving her the tools to transform from a top graduate student to a business professional. "Most importantly, together with all the talented peers we have at CEMS, the program helped cultivate and shape my development towards a total package that corporate giants look for," she adds.

The working culture in Hong Kong is very dynamic, but demanding and competitive. The work pace is fast and typically people will work long hours and even during weekends or holidays because of the overwhelming workload. Yet, there are many advantages in comparison to working in other cultures. Since Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city connecting the East and the West, there are many opportunities offered in the market. It is a stepping-stone for people who would like to go abroad and also a gateway for people to go into China when they do business. There is also a good blend in of different cultures in the city and also in the workplace, which makes it so dynamic.

In order to succeed as a businesswoman in China and Hong Kong, Ms. Tang offers this advice, "First and foremost, you must demonstrate your capabilities and aptitudes. No matter what you do, even if it is simply translating a document, if you make no mistake at all, it shows your prudence. My line manager used to make a compliment along with a joke that 'a top graduate student even translates like a top graduate student'.

"The great economic boom as China shifts towards the service economy has also been favorable towards increasing the number of women in the workforce. In fact, the female employment rate in China rose as high as 73% this year and in 2015"





Secondly, you need to build your own personal brand with a high executive ability and craft a strategic direction. For instance, as a Management Associate, my personal brand is that through all my three different rotations, my work speaks for itself and my line managers would always welcome me back.

Third, leverage your unique characteristics as a woman. Although being emotional might be viewed negatively, if you manage and use it correctly, this could help you to build a circle of influence within a company. Also, because of the new intellectual economy and e-commerce boom, there is a higher tendency to practice win-win, mutual expectation and trust-based management. For women, this is often a natural strength and with coaching and development, it could become a major winning factor. Humanity has become the new golden rule to exceptional leadership.



Finally, share your opinions and aspirations for development by asking for feedback. "How did I do?" "What could I have done better?" "What else could I do?" These questions could provide many benefits. Asking for feedback also helps build closer relationship, with your peers, managers or your mentors. And tell your managers what your drive/motivation is and what you are interested to do!"



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
 CEMS graduates
 HKUST campus
 The campus from the sea
 Catherine Lo
 Summer Tang



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Lo is Assistant Director of MSc Programs at HKUST Business School. Summer Tang is a CEMS alumna and Management Associate at Hilti (China) Distribution Ltd.

