RISING VALOR: A RESEARCH STUDY OF CHINESE WOMEN WORKING IN FACTORIES, EDUCATING THEMSELVES AND REDEFINING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

A dissertation submitted to the Kent State University College of Education, Health, and Human Services in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Few empirical studies directly address education among women factory workers in China, much less their sense of agency, power, character and awareness. This dissertation seeks to discover whether among women factory workers in the core manufacturing center, the Yangtze River Delta region of China, educational opportunities and other resources enable women workers to make their own choices, increase their independence, and build a greater awareness of themselves and their role in this world, to self-empower. It examines the gradual transformation of Chinese women factory workers and analyzes their patterns of interaction, attitudes, and perceptions regarding some traditional Chinese values. Results of the study showed that these women factory workers in China, regardless of education level, familial status, or position in the workplace, continuously sought improvement, and that this improvement is their path to empowerment. These women use formal, informal, and nonformal education to develop themselves, and many of the participants acknowledged that continuing their education would have the potential to significantly impact their sense of awareness, self-sufficiency, and decision-making. Although Chinese women factory workers face great challenges in their lives, their willingness to succeed through continuing their education demonstrates their will to persevere. I conclude that increased opportunities in education
can be used to facilitate women’s empowerment for Chinese women factory workers and enhances the capability, agency and achievement of their aspirations by these women.

*KEYWORDS:* women’s empowerment, agency, factory, resources, employment, education, culture
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Study Background

Globalization has opened the economic market to greater social and political scrutiny, and in recent years the working conditions of Chinese factory workers have become an international concern. Much of the recent literature illuminates the difficult conditions Chinese factory workers face, including housing and working conditions, limited access to social benefits, medical benefits, and schooling (Wong, He, Leung, Lau, Chang, 2008). Moreover, numerous articles and books have revealed how laborers in Chinese factories, many of them women, work very long hours and receive paltry compensation (Wilhelm, 1994). However, this limited critical research tends to create a marginal perception which does not present a comprehensive picture of women factory workers in China, including their perspectives regarding education. More qualitative research is needed to establish a better understanding of the lives of these women, their perspectives, goals, decision-making and achievements as they empower themselves and foster agency in while working within a rigorous factory environment.

Select studies have shown that factory work has not only improved the global economy, in some communities it has augmented opportunities for women, even elevating the status of these women in their families and communities (Chang, 2012) where men tend to hold a higher social status (Connerley, 2005). Historically, Chinese society limited the social mobilization of women. Traditional Confucian China subjected women to an extremely low status: women were subordinate to men—obeying fathers
when young, husbands when married and adult sons when widowed (Shu, 2004). Tamara Hamlish (2003) purports that during the early years of the new Chinese republic, the government encouraged women to obtain an education and to pursue professional occupations; they also enacted laws to protect the marriage rights of women and sanctioned laws granting property rights to women, giving them more influence over their own resources. However, the patriarchal beliefs and practices of Confucian China continued into the 1980s (Shu, 2004), and remnants of those beliefs and practices are still visible today in some Chinese communities.

 Millions of women have separated from their families and moved away from their home villages and cities in hope to find a better job and have a better life (Wong, He, Leung, Lau, Chang, 2008). In 2015, 277.47 million migrant workers had left their place of residence to labor in other areas; 33.6 percent of that floating population\(^1\) were female (Statistics and facts about Migrant Workers, 2016). Recent studies have exposed the struggle of many women and girls in China who have limited access to schooling and lack economic roles outside the home, unless they migrate to places like the factories to work. Female migrant workers have a great deal at stake when they make the transition from rural life to urban life associated with the factory. For instance, many women factory workers—particularly the women that work on the production lines—dropped out of school at a young age to begin working; because of their limited formal education, many of these workers feel trapped in a cycle of physically demanding jobs with low pay

\(^1\) Floating population is a term used to categorize the millions of rural residents that work outside their town, city, or village of residence.
and very few opportunities for advancement. However, many of these women have found ways to navigate these environments, using education and other various tools and opportunities to improve their lives, advance their position, even their social mobility.

**Manufacturing in China**

Since Chairman Deng Xiaoping welcomed foreign investment and trade to China in the 1980s, the country’s economic growth and employment rate has risen exponentially. According to the International Labour Organization, in 2014 the number of employed individuals in China was 68.47% of the total working age population (Banister, 2013). For the past few decades, manufacturing has been the driving force of the Chinese economy. Countries across the globe, including the United States, perceived China as a chief provider of cheap labor. Indeed, Chinese manufacturing has a direct connection to the American consumer. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2006, China became second-largest trading partner in manufactured goods to the United States (Banister, 2013). It is also the biggest source of textiles in America, and accounts for a 37 percent share of apparel imported to the United States (Chalabi, 2014). The explosion of the manufacturing industry also created a surge in urban employment. Manufacturing employment in China rose from 85.9 million in 2002 to 99 million in 2009 (Banister, 2013). Nicholas Lardy (2015) stated in his report for the Peterson Institute for International Economics that “between 2003 and 2014 total urban manufacturing employment doubled and the share of the urban workforce employed in manufacturing rose from 15 to 20 percent.” Although numerous reports and articles state that the economic growth in China has slowed in recent years, the manufacturing industry
still plays an important role in the economic growth of the country as well as the quality of life for the millions of factory employees and their families.

**Problem Statement: Who Are Women Factory Workers in China?**

Behind the manufacturing powerhouse in China are millions of women of various ages who work on the factory assembly line and in the offices. Researchers have begun looking into factory workers in China; however, little is written regarding questions of women’s empowerment, their education, and female factory workers in China. Often these women are stereotyped in research studies and articles as uneducated, quiet, submissive victims of the Chinese patriarchal household structure. Lee (1998) justly argued that this generalization of women factory workers in China actually suppressed the voice of these women. It is also important to note that the categorization of “factory women” is an umbrella term externally applied to these workers; some female factory employees do not label themselves as factory women. In fact, one participant in this study explicitly stated that she did not consider her work as in the factory, more just as work at a general company.

Many people perceive Chinese women who work in the factories as *dagongmei*\(^2\), young single women who migrated from rural villages to work on the assembly lines and create a better life for themselves and their families. While this picture may be accurate for some, it excludes the wide range of women that work at the factory and the various positions they hold in company.

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\(^2\) Dagongmei is the Chinese term for working girls (Pun, 1999)
Researcher Positionality

In 2010, the string of suicides by Foxconn workers highlighted in the international media introduced me to a community of people who faced a multitude of changes and challenges. I wanted to know more about these workers, especially the women. Then in 2012, I read Leslie Chang’s novel Factory Girl (2009) which showed me an entirely different perspective of Chinese women factory workers. Chang introduced women who worked hard under difficult circumstances, but still navigated the system to increase their economic resources, transform their lives and other lives around them. Their power, independence, self-awareness, hope, and determination for a better future made me want to know more about these women. What drives these women? How do they see themselves and their role in this world? How do they navigate the protocols of family, society and tradition, confront challenges in their lives and empower themselves? Their voices, stories, and transformative experiences were missing from the literature about factory women that need to tell their stories. This notion drew me to China to meet these female factory workers and learn about their lives.

Aim of the Dissertation

This dissertation explores the critical role of female laborers as Chinese workers and attempts to capture an authentic picture of how Chinese women factory workers perceive themselves, educate themselves, and manage the opportunities and vulnerabilities they encounter while working in the factory environment. A larger goal of this study was to give voice to the stories and experiences of Chinese women working in factories. Additionally, this dissertation attempts to redefine the application of
empowerment. Through comprehensive research analysis of interviews and observations, this dissertation study examines whether the factory experiences of Chinese women increase their self-awareness, sense of independence, and ability to make personal choices. This field investigation also seeks to understand how these women felt that working at the factory increased their status within their family and community, and if working at the factory changed the way these women made choices for themselves and their families.

Educational opportunities and other tools that provide information and support to these women were also examined. The women are asked to discuss their education levels, value of education as well as any ways they continue their learning. Stephen Billet (2007) argues that individual learning and remaking cultural practices are interdependent. He says that “this process of learning presents the learner as constructor of new choices, not constrained to those in the immediate circumstances” (Billet, 2007, p. 48). This dissertation study seeks to discover if structural opportunities like education, work environments, and social networks (both personal and virtual) helped these women factory workers make more subjective choices, increase their independence, and build a greater awareness of themselves and their role in this world. Finally, this study aims to understand how these women transformed themselves by flouting protocols of family, history and tradition.

**Significance of the Study: Understanding the Need for This Research**

A number of research studies have centered on the identity transformation female migrants experience once they begin working at the factory. Nana Zhang (2007)
followed a group of migrant women through their migration circuit from work site to home village in order to discover how those women constructed and negotiated their identity and subjectivity throughout the migrant process. Zhang argued that rural migrant women diverge from their identity as peasants while constructing barriers against other rural migrant in dissimilar contexts. Pun (1999) also explored the identity shift of female “dagongmei (working girls)” as they navigated through the strenuous factory environment. Pun claimed that regional and gender inequalities, regulatory practices, and symbolic representations facilitated new social identities in these women both inside and outside the workplace. Few empirical studies go beyond studying the negotiation of identity to address the sense of agency, power, character and awareness in women factory workers in China. One study by Pun (2005) explored whether migrant workers in China foster self-concept, power, and agency, simply through obtaining positions at factories (Pun, 2005). Hence, this qualitative dissertation adds to the literature by revealing how female factory workers in China increase self-concept, power, and agency within the factory environment. Through meaningful qualitative interviews, this dissertation examines how women factory workers in China evolve and use education to improve their lives while working at the factory. It illuminates the gradual transformation of Chinese women factory workers as well as their patterns of interaction, attitudes, and breakdowns of certain traditional values. Information from this dissertation study helps to establish a deeper understanding of the lives of female factory workers in China and how they value education, characterize themselves, foster agency and overcome obstructions to their achievement inside and out of the rigorous factory environment.
Pun (2005) argued that female factory workers face many socio-economic problems, including cultural change and social development. Focusing on Chinese women workers in this dissertation contributes to the substance of women’s empowerment because these women are authentic markers of an established disposition, and they provide a vast range of experience that may not be argued by other studies. “The social aspect of gender works well to illustrate the complexities or cultural specificities of cross-cultural fieldwork and calls for bringing the wider culture in to get better at local descriptions and inferences; both conveyed explicitly and in more subtle ways” (Ryen, 2008, p. 94). In this way, the ideal of women’s empowerment will break from established processes and become relevant to a veritable distinctiveness that gradually informs women’s empowerment in any culture. Most importantly, this dissertation shows that developing women’s empowerment may be part of a single group’s continuously evolving navigation or equally may stand alone as an exceptional and challenging achievement. Finally, there a myriad of studies of factory workers in Guangdong province, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, but fewer studies share the experiences women workers in other areas of China. This dissertation further adds to the literature by focusing on women factory workers in the Yangtze River Delta Region, creating a more inclusive picture of women factory workers in the People’s Republic of China.

**Study Design**

This dissertation study was conducted from January 2015 through August 2016, using a basic interpretative qualitative approach to examine several elements of empowerment in female factory workers in the Yangtze River Delta region of China.
The Yangtze River Delta Economic Zone compromises of Shanghai, Jiangsu province, and Zhejiang province. The area attracts a great deal of local and foreign investment. “In terms of economic size, population, standard of living, market, and international institutional indicators, the Yangtze River Delta is the engine of China’s economic growth. Its main industries include R&D [Research and Development], financial service, manufacturing, logistics, information technology, and international trading” (Yong, 2012). This qualitative study centered around three specific research questions. How do women factory workers in China conceptualize self-concept, power, and agency? What perspectives do these women have of structural opportunities like social networks, work environments, and education? In what ways do Chinese women factory workers overcome obstructions to achievement? To answer these questions, data for this research was collected through observation research in field notes as well as through semi-structured participant interviews conducted in Standard Chinese with the assistance of an interpreter. Convenience and snowball sampling were utilized to obtain participants for this study.

The participants for this dissertation study were 24 Chinese women factory workers, 18 years and older, who worked in the offices and on the production floors in various factories in the Yangtze River Delta Economic Zone in China. Most of the women interviewed were second generation factory workers (Pun, Lu, 2010) who were born in the late 1970s and 1980 and entered the labor markets during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The small number of participants in this dissertation study does not allow for generalization or exact replication.
Qualitative data collection and analysis methods were utilized throughout the dissertation study to explore the conditions and settings of employment, education, entertainment, and culture with which Chinese women factory workers engaged. Transcripts from audio recorded interviews were translated from Standard Chinese to English and then coded along with any research observation studies. Continuous comparison of data and multiple revisions were made in order to validate any emerging themes, relationships, or interpretations. Multiple checks and balances, including reflexivity, were employed to verify accuracy of the field research and reduce any implicit bias.

**Definition of Terms**

**Agency:** This study focuses on personal agency as a component of empowerment. Barry Mitnick (2013) states that Stephen Ross originated the theory of agency when he developed the theory of economic agency. Mitnick himself developed an institutional approach to agency. However, Mitnick states that it was Susan Shapiro who “introduced agency concepts to sociology” (2013, p. 7). Agency theory is now well rooted in the social sciences.

Kabeer (1999) defines agency as having the ability to express her goals and take action toward them.

Agency is more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their *sense* of agency, or ‘the power within.’ While agency tends to be operationalized as ‘decision-making’ in the social science literature, it can take a number of other
forms. It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities. (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438)

In this dissertation I use the term as applied to individual women, in particular, women factory workers in China.

**Education:** Education takes place in various settings and comes in many forms, including nonformal education, informal education, and formal education. Formal education is normally defined as learning taking place in a standard classroom setting and structure in a degree granting program. Nonformal education consists of education taking place outside of the standard classroom; one prime example of this type of education is on-the-job training (which will be mentioned in this dissertation). According to La Belle (1982), “nonformal education” was introduced during the 1960’s often in the context of education in developing countries, this dissertation will use this term solely referencing nonformal education for adults. “For adults, it has often meant individual and social development, health and safety instruction, and job training” (La Belle, 1982, p. 161). Haiam Eshach defines informal education as spontaneous learning from life situations; “Informal learning is distinguished by having no authority figure or mediator. The learner is motivated intrinsically and determines the path taken to acquire the desired knowledge, skill, or abilities” (2007, p. 173). In this dissertation I note all three forms of education, with a primary emphasis on nonformal education when discussing the education levels and practices of Chinese women factory workers.
Employment: Oxford Dictionary defines employment as “the condition of having paid work” (2015). In this dissertation, I defined employment as the state of a person or persons who are employed full-time or part-time during a specified payroll period in a job by which that person or persons earn a living.

Factory: In this dissertation, I use the term factory to designate as a building, or group of buildings, with facilities along and a system to manufacture goods on a mass scale by machines and/or individual craftsmen.

Resources: Resources are not limited to means for economic gains. Naila Kabeer states, “Resources include not only material resources in the more conventional economic sense, but also the various human and social resources which service to enhance the ability to exercise choice” (1999, p. 437). For many social science scholars, Kabeer (1999) notes, access to resources correlates with specific choices women make; moreover, changes in women’s resources will translate into changes in the choices they able to make and are contingent, in part, on other aspects of surrounding circumstances in which these women make their choices. In this dissertation, I used the term as Kabeer and the social scientists she references describe it.

Women’s empowerment: “Despite the multiple ideological roots to the concept, empowerment can be broadly defined as ‘a progression that helps people gain control over their own lives and increases the capacity of people to act on issues that they themselves define as important’” (Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, Bird, 2007, p.10). Some definitions of women’s empowerment emphasize consciousness-raising about overt or covert discrimination of certain groups of marginalized women. Nelly Stromquist (2003)
considers women's empowerment a multidimensional process of social change in which the marginalized population be key actors in the change process economically, politically, intellectually, and emotionally. Naila Kabeer (1999) argues that empowerment is not just about the ability to make choices; it also includes the conditions of choices, their content and consequences: “Inasmuch as our notion of empowerment is about change, it refers to the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (p.437). In this dissertation, I refer women’s empowerment to women gaining more access to and control of various resources, increasing their ability to make strategic choices and decisions, and transcending the social construct that has been placed on women, thus creating a self-identity, which in turn moves others to bring about change.

**Concepts Foundational to the Study**

**Taking a Look at Self-Concept**

Self-concept consists of one’s idea of her own strengths, weaknesses, self-image, etc, and is a crucial component for agency in women. For instance, women who describe themselves in a more positive light are most likely to have goals and work towards achieving those goals. A woman’s self-concept is a key component of her empowerment. Hence, I believe that a more positive self-concept may increase the likelihood of a woman feeling empowered. That is, how a woman conceptualizes herself and her place in the world can either help facilitate or detract from her empowerment.
Empowerment at a Glance

Women’s empowerment refers to the ability to choose material, human, and social resources, as well as exercise agency, and attain achievements. Kabeer (2010) defines empowerment as “the expansion of in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (1999, p. 436). However, Kabeer rightly states that empowerment is not just about being able to make choices; it also includes the conditions of choices, their content and consequences. For instance, prosperity within a society may reduce gender inequalities but may tighten social restrictions on women’s ability to make choices (Kabeer, 1999). Regardless of the circumstances, empowerment requires some manner of change. Moreover, achievements can be used as a measure of empowerment. Empowerment is not always a public revelation; it can occur privately within one’s home or simply within oneself. Kabeer (1999) stated that these private forms of women’s empowerment may be necessary where women may have much to lose from the disruption of normal social relationships.

Empowerment Versus Agency

Kabeer (1999) contends that empowerment extends beyond making subjective choices, and involves an assessment of the values entrenched in agency. In their discussion of women’s empowerment, many scholars will mention agency; however, it is paramount to understand that agency and empowerment are not interchangeable terms. Agency, “the ability to defend one’s goals and act upon them” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438), does not equate to empowerment. Murphy-Graham (2010) illustrated this notion in her description of Anita, a Honduran woman, who became empowered in the public sphere.
during her participation in a free education program, but was not empowered at home where she lived with her abusive husband. Murphy-Graham stated that throughout her studies Anita became more confident, social, and independent; on the other hand, her husband remained controlling and abusive. The author stated that Anita finally made the decision to leave her husband after he threatened to take her life in front of their children. Murphy-Graham argued that even though Anita was empowered in her public life, she was not empowered in regards to her relationship with her husband. However, she did possess agency and chose to remove herself and her children from a dangerous situation.

Kabeer states that agency can be displayed in various forms, and can be exercised individually or collectively. She says, “It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). It can also have positive and negative effects, depending on the situation. Similar to empowerment, agency is not solely about decision making. It also encompasses the motivation, ambitions, and action one takes to achieve her goal. This dissertation addresses address both the concept of empowerment and agency experienced by Chinese women factory workers, including their decision making strategies and any values, customs or traditions that may have constrained their ability to make tactical life choices.

Chapter Conclusion

Women working in the offices and on the production workshops significantly contribute to the manufacturing industry of China. Many research studies have misrepresented these women by offering a biased image of powerless female workers
who migrated from the countryside in search of a better life. This basic interpretive qualitative dissertation is to establish a greater understanding of the lives of female factory workers in the Yangtze River Delta region in mainland China. This necessary qualitative research study helps to fulfill the disproportion in field studies regarding women factory workers in China. By illustrating the personal transformation of these women, this dissertation exemplifies a strategy of women’s empowerment by redefining the persona of empowered women.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to gain an understanding of empowerment among women factory workers in China, a succinct review of some notable theories and studies that structure women empowerment must be given. This literature review provides crucial background to research questions which focus on women’s empowerment in Chinese women factory workers, and provides critical examination of topics, such as migration, education, along with other personal and sociological issues shaping women’s empowerment. Moreover, examining several research studies about Chinese family household structures proved tremendously useful for this dissertation study since the information helped to establish the changing dynamic of modern Chinese families and the roles women have within those new structures. The phenomenon will be explainable in part through this dissertation study which elucidates how factory working women underscore the basis of empowerment in the context of the family. To a limited extent, this review calls attention to studies which address the effect government policies have on the development of agency in factory workers and analyzes the constraints they face in light of these regulations and procedures. Finally, this literature review scrutinizes the cultural experiences factory women workers share and the collective spirit which fosters the increase of social capital among these women.

Navigating Empowerment Theories

The concept of women’s empowerment has its roots in many women’s movements inspired by various worldviews and cultures, and many definitions of
empowerment for women have emerged as a result of certain patterns, cultural experiences and tradition, ethnic and racial politics. Some other definitions of women’s empowerment emphasize consciousness-raising about overt or covert discrimination of certain groups of marginalized women. Existing literature may be summarized to address the following components of women’s empowerment:

- The ability to negotiate one’s role and status within one’s community
- Sense of confidence, power and creativity
- The ability to obtain gainful employment or gainful economic activity
- Making subjective choices
- Ability to bring about change for self and others
- Autonomy
- Increased cultural awareness
- Control over resources to achieve aims
- Personal physical and psychological safety

The question “How do female factory workers in China conceptualize self-concept, power and agency?” asks how Chinese factory women workers define their integrity even though they continue to experience marginalization and cultural prejudices in the prevailing system of patriarchy. Although not a primary voice, Lee Dominelli, cited by Cheung and Liu (2004), also underscores how in order to invoke real change, the cultural, spiritual, and ethnic sensitivities of women in different parts of the world must be considered. Their discussions lead to theories for investigating power and agency of Chinese women factory workers in this dissertation study.
Research theories, such as Nelly Stromquist’s empowerment theory (2003), describe women’s empowerment as a process that vigorously works to change the distribution of power between men and women on both personal and societal levels. Within this context, women struggle to maintain gender equality while institutions, hierarchies and beliefs actively work to deny empowerment for women. According to Stromquist, it is “a process to change the distribution of power, both in interpersonal relationships and in institutions throughout society” and goes further to state this: “Empowerment can succeed only if it is a mode of learning close to the women’s everyday experiences and if it builds upon the intellectual, emotional, and cultural resources the participants bring to their social space” (Stromquist, 2003, p. 18).

Stromquist points to a distribution of power that may not necessarily occur in Chinese factories among women workers. Their goal is not for ultimate distribution of power; rather, their process toward empowerment is unique because it is based on self-awareness.

This dissertation study will look closely at the facets of Monkman’s empowerment examples only to compare how Chinese women factory workers achieve this kind of empowerment status. Karen Monkman analyzes various dimensions of empowerment and offers examples that show how women are empowered, specifically women in the Third World, and lists four components of empowerment: cognitive, economic, political, and psychological (Monkman 1998). She specifies that empowerment should occur both individually and collectively, and maintains that both individuals and social organizations may be empowered through education or training.
efforts. As she has examined several projects designed to empower women living in the Third World and concludes that “different dimensions of empowerment are often recognizable in the same settings, situations and processes” (Monkman, 2008, p. 505), this dissertation study also explores opportunities for education and training designed for factory workers and are borne out of social projects, and will thoroughly investigate how the involvement in social and institutional strategies support agency, power, and self-concept among these women workers.

Certain Chinese researchers who focus their studies on historical and social movements among women in China examine specific social issues each group of women face in their communities. Feminist scholar Feng Xu states that “the Chinese movement strives to cultivate women’s consciousness as women essentially different from men” (2009, p. 200). Li Xiaojiang, a pioneer in the Chinese women’s movement, states that women’s liberation should concentrate on personal revolution, rather than a social revolution, including “ordinary women called to emancipate themselves by cultivating their own consciousness as women” (Xu, 2009, p. 210). Adding to the literature, this dissertation study utilizes the personal stories that evolve from factory workers as evidence that having empowerment is a necessary reality for Chinese women working in factories, thus giving veracity to power and agency and redefining the process of women’s empowerment.

Asking the question “How do women factory workers in China conceptualize self-concept, power and agency?” helps to show how very few studies have centered on female factory workers in China and have not given any authenticity to how these women
gain self-concept, power and agency within the factory environment. Some research studies (Wong, He, Leung, Lau, Chang, 2008) about women’s empowerment only target strategies that would validate social identity; for example, making structural changes, improving health and education conditions, identifying much needed sources in the community, and in some instances making connection with gender and heritage. Such exploration into landscape, history, family, events, and places do not always make explicit a definition of women’s empowerment. Wong, He, Leung, Lau, Chang (2008) theorize that current migration trends may have provided opportunities for women in rural areas to leave their villages in order to find agency through self-improvement and achievement, which in turn may improve their mental health. The authors point to women’s empowerment in a Chinese modernization context, but at the same time they are thoroughly engaged with the mental health of migrant workers.

Is Education the Expressway to Empowerment?

This dissertation involves qualitative fieldwork that exposes the value of education among women in the factory; therefore, it is essential to analyze how Seeberg (2011) theorizes empowerment based on field work among village girls’ education in China. Seeberg expands the capability approach dimensions of freedom wellbeing, agency freedom, and achievement of various valued lifestyles. This article is vital to this dissertation study because it reports on fieldwork of a long-term qualitative study conducted among 58 village girls in a remote village in mainland China. Seeberg (2011) defines as the following: wellbeing as affective and cognitive self-expression and reflection, which may include economic and political considerations; agency freedom as
decision making in terms of cognitive, psychological, economic and political aspects and expression; and achievement as valued functionings or outcomes. She also recognizes these three topics: (1) a political state of being or condition (2) a subjective orientation or positionality (3) achievement and attainment in school. These areas are important to acknowledge in this dissertation study because they serve as a frame of reference to understanding education among Chinese women. In addition, this dissertation study organizes its research question to embrace the perspectives factory working women have toward social, occupational, and educational frameworks that give focus to those empowerment capabilities.

This discussion of education is well-supported in the article by Seeberg (2011) as she assesses how education has empowered these village girls. Her article emphasizes how the *Guanlan Sisters* gained both voice and agency through their education. Seeberg explains in the article that even though some of the village girls dropped out of formal schooling, they still continued to learn on their own, and all the participants in her study agreed that knowledge is crucial to life “now” (Seeberg, 2011). According to Seeberg, some of the girls value their education for practical job applications while others have a more holistic understanding. Similar to Seeberg’s study, the question in this dissertation study regarding education also includes discussions and examples that illustrate the presence of empowerment among Chinese women factory workers.

This dissertation looks closely at diverse stories that reflect the lives of women factory workers struggling to survive grinding poverty, cultural upheavals, and particular details of distant locations. In fact, to bring insight, order and meaning to the concept of
education as a tool for forging women’s empowerment, the findings from this investigation also establish how the value of education endures as a testament to the empowerment of women factory workers. Some scholars have defined empowerment of women in terms of education, which means that their perspectives have opened up a new discourse; in this regard this study has effectively focused on observations about factory women’s education that may have gone unnoticed.

   Getting an education underscores the basic ideology of scholars who see change in the lives of Chinese factory workers as proof for empowerment among women in particular. Scholar Xiaoling Shu (2004) speaks to particular education of individual women who inhabit social roles; her work directs attention to a central concept in this research study that relates to self-concept, power, and agency. For example, Shu examines how education builds agency in Chinese women and how they increase their capabilities to make more choices. She states, “Education thus empowers individuals, particularly women, opening up new employment and earnings opportunities, expanding individual frames of reference, and changing the way they view themselves in relation to the outside world” (Shu, 2004, p. 314). Shu’s study has opened up opportunities for new discourse that will generate more specifics than the following: a broad sociological view of perceptions regarding Chinese women and individual education; how the tremendous economic growth in China has helped increase the percentages of female students at various levels of schooling; the many studies that show that there are gains in some areas, but women are still at a disadvantage when it comes to levels of higher education (‘The Dilemma in Chinese Women's Receiving an Education, “2000). Further research is
needed to understand how women with higher educational levels are more aware of the causes and forms of gender inequality; conversely, while women with lower educational levels seem more apt not to realize their own disadvantaged position or hope to change it (“The Dilemma in Chinese Women's Receiving an Education,” 2000).

Much of the following discussion around these studies largely pertains to giving data and details that entail some commonalities that have relevance to the lives of Chinese women factory workers. Writers (Wong, et al., 2008), examining the empowerment of Chinese rural-urban female migrant workers, found that “education level showed a positive association with vitality and mental health and was a risk factor for bodily pain and social functioning” (p.501). Adult education programs, opportunities for additional on-the-job training, and an overall increase in one’s knowledge base may essentially raise the education level of rural-urban female migrant workers and thus may even provide opportunities for empowerment. One particular study revealed that migrant workers took advantage of new education opportunities from educational institutions (Rucai, 2009). Rucai testifies that in 2006, Peking University created their Common School to provide continuing education classes to its community of approximately 3,000 migrant workers. The initial curriculum included social interaction, psychological health, sharing and tolerance, computer skills, and English (Rucai, 2009). In 2009, researchers at Peking University conducted a survey among the migrant workers at the university; the survey results indicated that the majority of migrant workers were aware of the gap between their professional skills and market demands, but did not pursue higher education because of limited time or excessive costs (Rucai, 2009, p. 55-56). For
example, learning the English required for the college entrance examination is very
expensive in big cities in China; it might cost a worker’s entire annual income; therefore,
many people who are struggling with basic needs most likely will not consider learning
English for the purpose of entering higher education.

Some studies show notions that define change among women as an oppressive
and/or liberating part of women empowerment. Esther Ngan-ling Chow (2008) defines
empowerment as both a goal and process. One focus of Chow’s study is how gendered
migration relates “to the meaning and practice of empowerment of migrant workers”
(2008, p. 94), and she records three components in her study of empowerment: “access to
and control of resources (i.e., travel costs, loans, social capital, income disposal),
strategic choice decision-making (i.e., the migration decision, job search or change), and
dealing with gender regimes of the family, the firm, and the state in the two phases of
before and during migration (Chow, 2008, p.81). These details in Chow’s work identify
patterns in migration among Chinese women and is significant when developing research
and theory about empowerment in this dissertation study. Hence, it is necessary to
discuss these articles as relative to the understanding of Chinese factory women workers
because the information helps with concept building and agency is essential in constructing
accurate accounts throughout the study.

Expressing Self-Concept and Agency

The concept of personal agency speaks directly to workers in Chinese factories
and is marked by the desire among workers to have a choice. Kabeer states, “The
availability of alternatives at the discursive level, of being able to at least imagine the
possibility of having chosen differently, is this crucial to the emergence of a critical consciousness, the process by which people move from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical perspective on it.” (1999, p. 441). The ability for a woman to choose, her awareness of the capability to choose, as well as the choices she makes can significantly affect her life and the livelihood of others around her. According to Kabeer (1999), the conditions of choice requires one to differentiate choices made from the vantage point considering possible alternatives versus making choices without knowledge of the alternatives or possible disadvantages of alternatives. In addition, Kabeer (1999) states that the consequences of choice, where one must separate major life choices (e.g., job opportunities or marriage) from less significant choices, must be examined. “The consequences of choice can be further evaluated in terms of their transformatory significance, the extent to which the choice made have the potential for challenging and destabilizing social inequalities and the extent to which they merely express and reproduce those inequalities” (Kabeer, 1999, p.461). As a central tenet in this dissertation study, personal agency will be also characterized by the achieved merit of factory women workers.

Lang Ma and Francine Jacobs write a methodical article which introduces “considerable personal agency” (2010. P. 807) among female factory workers in China, a pervasive topic in the scholarship regarding women factory workers. Ma and Jacobs (2010) interviewed twelve women working in factories in China. Data from their interviews reveal signs of self-agency, whether it was doing research to work for a “good factory” which provides fair accommodations for its employees, or leaving factories with
subpar working conditions. Their study shows how these women took steps to increase agency and plan for the future. The researchers presented their participants “as active agents in shaping their own lives through a complex weave of selection, optimization and compensation decisions” (2010, p. 817). The authors also impart the important factor that work environments need to facilitate opportunities for agency by establishing relatively progressive labor practices and creating a context for positive relations among the workers (Ma, Jacobs, 2010). Lastly, the study confirms that even though these women were able to demonstrate substantial personal agency, at times they had to make personal sacrifices (Ma, Jacobs, 2010), such as physical separation from their families, or the inability to complete their formal education.

**Women’s Empowerment as a Collective Effort**

Many studies which influenced this study advocate that the basis of women’s empowerment does not focus entirely on the individual level. Therefore, in addition to education, this dissertation pays specific attention to the condition of socialization and how it hinders or promotes self-concept among Chinese women who are controlled by relations. Examining the dynamics of women’s empowerment through some detailed case studies of particular organizations illustrates how some definitions of women’s empowerment move away from the individual experience and focus on the tremendous strength of women being active agents and further define their own concepts of voice and agency. Because self-concept is an important element connected to this dissertation study, the wealth of this research by Schuler, Islam, and Rattach (2010) highlights the differences in empowerment theories because they examine women’s empowerment
within a socio-cultural context. For this they center their focus on the ability of Bangladesh women to acquire resources and exert personal agency within a context of gender inequality. Their study demonstrates how the Bangladeshi women work to rise above the traditional practices and beliefs that act as barriers to women’s empowerment by clearly and frankly expressing their opinions and asserting themselves more than what is considered the norm (Schuler, Islam, Rattach, 2010). Analysis of women’s empowerment is also debated by Amatul R. Chaudhary, Muhammad Irfan Chani and Zahid Pervaiz, whose concept of empowerment involves women gaining power and finding agency on a societal level. Chaudhary, Chani and Pervaiz (2012) impart a comprehensive focus of the concept, and recommend strategies for achieving empowerment:

The very concept of empowerment implies its objective i.e., to rectify the power imbalance between men and women which severely constrains achievements of human development. Thus basically all governmental, personal, private and family based efforts to rectify past neglect of human development in the case of females are steps toward empowerment. This phrase has many dimensions: demographic, social, psychological, cultural and economic. Each aspect is interlinked with the other in a subtle, inexpressible yet strong string forming a logical coherent whole. All steps towards empowerment should, in the final analysis, be reinforcing one another. These require fundamental changes at many levels of society including those within households recognizing that women, just like men, make responsible decisions for themselves, their families, their
communities and the rest of the world. (Chaudhary, Chani and Pervaiz, 2012, p. 971-972)

This theoretical perspective is useful because it indicates that women’s empowerment is not fixed or permanent except when the concept of self, as proposed by questions in this dissertation, continues to reinforce it.

**Empowerment and Maintaining a Sense of Self Within Work Environment**

Another theoretical framework used to explain women’s empowerment is the world of global corporations. This framework is based largely on the work by Sheryl Sandberg (2013). The work is useful in explaining the importance of having a clear understanding of a sense of self within a current corporate environment. Her work suggests that transformation of self is a necessary prerequisite toward creating gender empowerment. The details of her ascension in the corporate world provides incentive to make this dissertation study employ the question that will provide an avenue for self-expression and the realization of personal goals; among Chinese women factory workers empowerment significantly would affect change. Sandberg’s work gives telling examples that demonstrates economic benefits of women’s empowerment; these examples are intricately bound to voice and agency that make an overall impact on the development of gender equality. Although this dissertation labels specific work conditions that Chinese factory women face, Sandberg’s work is a reminder not to ignore the complexities of powerful economics or the most immediate context in which power relations surge in the workplace. The interaction of male power is made clear when she contrasts her victimization in the workplace to her own struggle to define herself amid the
overwhelming male culture in the workplace. Nevertheless, her voice is established and she holds fast to her identity that develops her image. It is without gainsaying that her book underscores the reality that women innately are equally empowered as men; she suggests that barriers to women’s empowerment and equity are broken down when women have accepted the inner personal self through the integrative process of voice that reflects and refines their experiential life. For Sandberg (2013), her belief in her own abilities is the key to her empowerment. Because Chinese women constitute a majority of workers in factories, the interaction between Sandberg’s book and the research question regarding standpoints of work environments make a relationship that shows empowerment may occur in many ways.

**Tearing Away the Constraints to Achievement**

How Chinese female factory workers overcome obstructions to their achievement forms a dialogue in this dissertation study and relates to empowerment perspectives in research by many scholars. Many people are not sure what empowerment is for Chinese women factory workers because factories are sites for production and women often are employed for long hours at low wages. Seen in the context of these women’s lives, empowerment takes on a very different meaning. One research article which is fully embraced in this dissertation is that of Ching Kwan Lee (1995); who details categories of factory women workers in two specific categories: the maiden worker, and the matron worker. By outlining these patterns of women, Lee’s study helps to point out what may be the central cause of oppression among women factory workers. For example, Lee studied female workers at separate factories: one group in Shenzhen in mainland China,
and another group at a factory in Hong Kong. She (Lee, 1995) explains that the term “maiden worker” refers to the young unmarried women working at the factory, and that these women are perceived to be immature workers with low aspirations and motivations to learn new skills; they are also considered to be short-term workers, due to their inevitable marriage and departure from the factory. What is established and supported by Lee’s groupings of women is that this method is part of a system that keeps control over these women workers. This perspective is critical for Lee (1995) who also states that the status of these maiden workers is used to create a hierarchy among the workers and is exploited by management to keep these women in “low-ranked unskilled positions” (p. 385). Lee’s work contributes to the research for this dissertation because it demonstrates how unity among all women may be imperfect, but a development of empowerment will remain with some women. According to Lee, these women have various motivations for going to work at the factory. Lee gives examples to show how many of these young women fled home to pursue personal goals:

Many of these young women fled home to evade arranged marriages. Many also had personal goals like gaining experience, saving for dowries, or financing their educations. Because they intended to marry at some point, factory employment was preferred to other service jobs because of the popular association between factory work and endurance for hardship and disciplined labor, traits deemed desirable for future wives. Thus entering the factory meant preserving the appropriate femininity of maidens while earning a cash income and enjoying the freedom to explore romantic relationships (Lee, 1995, p.385).
Thus, the maiden workers working in Shenzhen believe that their “maiden worker” status empowers them by giving them “more freedom of choice of mate and more resources to improve their prospects for desirable husbands” (1995, p. 386), including learning additional skills (English, typing, computer proficiency) during their free time. Lee seems to emphasize choices and constraints imposed on these women, and in this way her work helps to answer the question in this dissertation study that seeks to find answers about obstruction to the development of empowerment. Because the possibility for empowerment lives in the interaction with the social and physical environments of women workers, this research study looks more at particular historical and social environments and the interplay of difficulties that determine how life for women factory workers is distorted.

The methods Lee (1995) uses are good productions for defining the “matron worker,” referring to married female workers at the factories who are perceived as domineering and matronly. To the si-lai (Cantonese vernacular expression), fulfilling her familial responsibilities is her first priority; work comes second (Lee, 1995). The details make it clear that unlike the maiden workers, these matron workers were also more concerned about retaining honorable repute than about increasing their income or job advancement. Lee also purports that matron workers view men as the breadwinners of the household. She states that the matron workers recognize their own capabilities to acquire the same skills and trainings the men receive, which in turn would increase their job mobility and status; however, they do not pursue these opportunities because they must invest more of their time and energy completing their household duties (Lee, 1995).
According to the author, these women do not envy their male superiors; nor do they resent their familial duties. In fact, she asserts that the status of these matron workers provide “them pretext for circumventing managerial demands” (Lee, 1995, p. 389), such as spending the night away from their home and children. This qualitative study uses these details particularly to show how women workers, in spite of their recognition of differences, consider obstructions to their development of empowerment as necessary for survival.

Other aspects considered in this dissertation study are the intergenerational differences among the migrant worker population. A few studies account for the different perspectives of older migrant workers and young migrant workers. Zhou Daming and Sun Xiaoyun (2011) conducted a ten-year longitudinal study in which they examined the different perceptions and relationships between older migrant workers (those who first left the countryside in the 1980s), and young migrant workers (those who left in the 1990s and 2000). Their study reveals significant differences between the two groups in regards to perceptions about individual identity versus collective identity, which significantly affected their level of autonomy. For instance, the researchers purport that for older migrant workers leaving one’s job is dishonorable, while the younger migrant workers see constant job changing as an advantage (Damiong, Xiaoyun, 2011). The work of Damiong and Xiaoyun is fundamental for this dissertation because their longitudinal study has the capacity to show various concepts of empowerment although social structure and social change are always shaping contradictions of perceptions and relations among older and younger migrant factory workers.
Where Do We Go From Here With Women’s Empowerment?

Fundamental to the definition of women’s empowerment is the image that is used to convey the essence of the concept. Since its coinage, women’s empowerment has been taken up by scholars and activists across communities around the globe, forging new meanings. Each definition often makes clear some of the strategies giving meaning to empowerment. The difficulty that arises in the development of a concrete definition is that these strategies have been formulated by different groups of women. However, the image of empowerment remains the same. It may mean that women are empowering themselves in various ways, educationally through computer technologies; also learning new skills that will be useful in today's advancing globalized world. This study sanctions factory women workers to qualify the changes in their lives, thus developing a more authentic definition of empowerment.

A Cursory View of Governmental Influence on Migrant Workers

This epigrammatic discussion concerning governmental policies provides a depiction that explains the realities workers face. Even a cursory view of research studies regarding Chinese government regulations shows how national and provincial governments exert a powerful influence that subsequently affects the lives of women factory workers in China. Government regulations, while some have been transformed over time, have not necessarily declined, and that is why this dissertation study must take note of those Chinese female factory workers who underscore those policies and changes that would make more opportunities available to them.
The Chinese government still does not encourage migrant workers to take up permanent residence in the cities. The state usually identifies rural migrants as temporary residents who work in the city and lack a formal urban hukou (Pun, 2007). Hukou refers to a residence registration system which “requires all persons to register their place of residence as determined by their birthplace or their parent’s birthplace” (Chow, 2008, p. 83), similar to a birth certificate purchased at birth or purchased later with fees. Thus, even if one is living in the urban area, if the birthplace of that person is the rural area, then he or she must register as a rural resident. These residency restrictions limit the empowerment of migrant workers, including schooling for their children. As rural hukou holders in China, these migrant workers may not have access to adequate insurance and may be excluded from the social security system. This dissertation study could not ignore these policies, particularly because they explain how the migrant workers are largely legally connected to the government systems. In addition, the strength and weaknesses of government regulations do symbolize real conditions in the lives of workers. The study by Chow (2008) encourages further investigation to find out the following: how regulations are in place to protect migrant workers; if they are often ignored or neglected by employers; whether or not some factories have sufficient written policies which support and protect workers; and does the Labour Bureau only investigate major law violations if they receive numerous complaints from workers (Pun, 2007). There is little doubt that an attempt to incorporate some of Chow and Pun’s works into this dissertation study would indicate social issues relevant in overcoming barriers to women’s empowerment because Chinese law guarantees equal rights in employment and
job selection, yet many women migrant workers continue to face great discrimination. For instance, Chinese law guarantees maternity leave, yet recent studies show that some women have been fired when they have become pregnant; sexual harassment is rampant, and some women have been forced into having affairs with their employers (Ye, 2004). In part, this phenomenon will be explainable in the dissertation study that will encourage these factory working women to underscore the basis of empowerment in the context of the family.

Dissecting the Chinese Family Household Structure

Family remains a principal factor in the lives of the Chinese factory women, indeed of most Chinese citizens. Thus, it is paramount that this dissertation examines the dynamic of Chinese family structure. In his case study of a rural village in northeastern China, Yun Yunxiang (1997) argued that while the structure of the Chinese family may vary, “the economic self-interest of the domestic group as a corporate enterprise” determines the general structure of the household. The author states that traditional Chinese structure centers on the parent-son relationship: “The traditional Chinese family is characterized by the centrality of the parent-son relationship in family life and its superiority over all other family relations” (p. 1). According to Cheng Cheng-Kun (1939), the traditional family pooled all economic resources together and shared amongst members of the family. The author states that the oldest male in the household dominated the family; he made all major decisions and settled any internal disputes. However, multiple studies show that modernization has drastically changed the traditional family structure in China. Anqi Xu and Yan Xia (2014) state that though
traditional family households still exist, extended families, nuclear families\(^3\), single-parent families, and double-income families with no children have increased with the increase of urbanization, and influence of individualism from Western ideology. In addition, according the authors, the impact of the one-child policy has created a family of parents and grandparent surrounding their energy around the only child.

Yun (1997) affirms that Chinese families have become more nuclear, with the husband-wife relationship becoming more central. With this smaller family structure, the author argues, the adult couple has more privacy and autonomy. Xu and Xia (2014) contend that “more than two-thirds of Chinese families are nuclear families and individual interests are more recognized today than ever in the past (p. 33) The authors make an important distinction when they contend that Chinese nuclear families differ from nuclear families in the West in that most Chinese nuclear families are not completely independent from their parental families: “Chinese nuclear families are unique in that they are anchored within the extended family network, and have constant physical interactions and emotional and financial exchanges with extended family members” (Xu, Xia, 2014, p. 36). The authors maintain that Chinese families are fluid and may organize and reorganize their living arrangements to fulfill family functions.

Recent research of Chinese households has also shown that the type of residence and the resulting benefits may affect the construct of Chinese families. Xia and Xu (2014) state that Chinese families with urban hukou, or residency, receive a multitude of

\(^3\) “An ‘nontraditional nuclear family’ consists of a father working away from home and a mother caring for their child with the help of relatives” (Xu, Xia, 2014, p. 9).
benefits including housing, health care, employment, and retirement. This in turn, they argue, may sway some families may manipulate the structure of their households in order to reap the maximum amount of social benefits. Additionally, Xia and Xu (2014) argue that privatized housing has allowed for more people to own property. As a result, many newlywed couples may choose to live alone rather than with the extended family. Yun (1997) states that a strong desire for independence may lead a newlywed couple to forego the custom of moving in with the parents of the groom. It is crucial to note that these arrangements are not finite and can convert to an extended household at any time, depending on the needs of the family. Researchers state that with multiple generations living under the same roof the Chinese extended family does not always look the same (Xu, Xia, 2014). Yun (1997) rightly argues that the duration of the extended family changes and may not be a permanent living arrangement. The author says, “Closely related to a new form of family division are changes in the duration of the coresidence period and the timing of the family division” (Yun, 1997, p. 1). In China, a child will usually live with his or her parents, and possibly grandparents, until that individual marries. The newly married couple may either choose to live with the parents or live alone. After the couple has a child, they may move in with the parents of the groom so the grandparents can help raise the child for a number of years, and then the couple may move back out when the child is older and more self-sufficient. Conversely, the couple may move their aging parents into their home in order to take better care of them. Consequently, this fluid exchange between nuclear and extended family can significantly affect the power and leadership roles within the family household.
Yun states, “Everyday cooperation, negotiation, and competition over such issues as power and influence, emotional attachment, moral obligation, and economic resources among individuals within a family are at least as important as family size and household composition” (1997, p.1). The author claims that there are multiple leadership roles within the Chinese family: one role is the family head who acts as the family spokesperson to represent the household to the public sphere. According to Yun, the head of household must be qualified enough to represent the family to the outside world, hence the appearance, communication style and relatability is important. The other lead position, which can be held by a more junior member of the family, is someone who makes the decisions and manages the overall household. Yun states that these roles can be held by one person, usually the dominant male, or could be divided amongst multiple individuals. Xu and Xia (2014) take this argument further by stating that family boundaries are not rigid. Correspondingly, this dissertation study also demonstrates that these familial roles and boundaries are prone to shift to fulfill the needs and interests of the family.

The Chinese family is an amalgamation of both collective and individual values and interests. Some studies have questioned whether Chinese family members have shifted their values from collective interests to individual interests (Xia, Xu, 2014). Xu and Xia warn, “Studies show that Chinese family members are struggling between their individual interest and collective interest of the family” (2014, p. 40). The researchers argue that Chinese family values and relationships have been impacted by the changes in Chinese society, government and education, and although family collectivism is still
needed and valued, cultural values like filial piety\textsuperscript{4} is challenged by an increasing emphasis on individualism. In 2013, the *New York Times* reported that Chinese officials enacted the “Elderly Rights Law\textsuperscript{5}” which outlined the filial duty of children to their parents, and allowed aging parents to sue their children for neglecting them (Wong, 2013). This recent law demonstrates that collective interests in Chinese families continue to take precedence over individual interests. While children in western countries are socialized to be from young to be independent and make key decisions about their futures by themselves, Xu and Xia (2014) state that Chinese children, on the other hand, typically grow up with their parents taking care of their every need and making key decisions regarding their future, sometimes even including marriage.

The importance of marriage has not declined in China. For many Chinese women, marriage is an integral part of their lives, a purpose they wish to fulfill. Cheng (1939) found in his study that marriage determined the status of women in large Chinese families: unmarried women had the least status in traditional Chinese family structure because they “had no position to uphold” (Cheng, 1939, p. 539). Cheng states that once married, women in traditional Chinese families elevated their status by birthing sons. “The more sons she bore, the greater was her social prestige. When her sons became men and took wives, her position was further elevated and the process of elevation continued

\textsuperscript{4}Filial piety is the underlying principle that children are obliged to serve and obey their parents, make them happy and care for them in their old age as a small way to pay them back for giving them life and raising them (Teon, 2016).

\textsuperscript{5}http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/03/world/asia/filial-piety-once-a-virtue-in-china-is-now-the-law.html?_r=0
with the coming of grandchildren and great grandchildren” (Cheng, 1939, p. 539). The more recent study by Xu and Xia (2014) indicates that among most Chinese men and women, marriage is still viewed as an important and ideal path for life; however, they admit that the age of first marriage is slowly and gradually getting older. Xu and Xia acknowledge the collective nature of Chinese culture urges individuals to relinquish their personal interests in order to benefit the family, or even country. “Marriage stability has been viewed as critical to maintaining the financial and political stability of the nation. Individuals seeking divorce could be seen to be selfish and a flaw or the deteriorating of moral character” (Xu, Xia, 2014, p. 46). The authors agree that after the economic reform in the 1980s, divorces became easier and subsequently increased. However, China continues to enjoy a high remarriage rate. Thus, “Chinese remarriage is stable in spite of the increase in divorce rate” (Xu, Xia, 2014, p. 46). Future research must be conducted to determine if this trend continues.

The Chinese family household is a unique but fluid social construct which can take various forms to suit the needs and circumstances of the family. Modernization and the influence of Western ideals have challenged the collective values and customs of the traditional Chinese family. “Family is the smallest social entity around which living activities are collectively organized for an individual member’s physical and financial well-being and more importantly for his/her emotional well-being in Chinese society” (Xu, Xia, 2014, p. 32). Above all, as Yun (1997) rightly asserts, the primary function of a Chinese family, and other families across the world, is to be a place where members of the family can harmonious and happy. Finally, Xu and Xia assert, “Existing studies have
not examined how economic reform and development affect Chinese women’s role and status in the family and women’s self-expression” (2014, p. 49). This dissertation aims to fill this current void in the literature by exploring how women factory workers perceive their role in the family and whether that status has changed since working at the factory.

**Connecting Through Social Networks**

This dissertation takes direction from many of the research studies and articles presented in this literature review to include the cultural experience factory women workers share. In theory many writers suggests that there is a collective spirit among female factory workers, which fosters the increase of social capital among these women. According to some writers, the theoretical perspectives inclusive to the collective spirit among Chinese female factory workers reveal the powerful influence of kinship, ethnicity, and gender (Pun, 2007). Another writer, Chow (2008) asserts that this social capital (e.g., network ties, friendships) is crucial throughout the migration process (e.g., mobilizing resources, covering migration costs, choosing migration destination).

Looking at the structure of collective spirit, the writer gives concrete examples that speak to the practice that many factory workers will bring their relatives and peers from their village to work at the same factory where they are currently employed. Pun Ngai states that at the factory, a type of “sisterhood” is formed. The “big sisters,” who usually have more skills or experience working in the factory, become informal, and sometimes formal, mentors to the younger workers, helping them adjust to factory life as quickly as possible (Pun, 2007).
This dissertation study seeks to redefine some of these relations or practices, only to further explain women’s empowerment and to look more closely at the consciousness women use to establish “workers networks” built on influences of kinship, ethnicity, interests, to name a few cultural experiences. In fact, some of these discussions by writers pose a challenge to this dissertation because some writers agree that “Workers who find themselves in the midst of a crisis or a strike easily transform these “soft supports—the kinship networks, ethnic enclaves, spirit of sisterhood and personal relationship – into “hard” resources for industrial struggle” (Chan, Pun, 2009, p. 292). Also, in times of struggle, previous divisions among workers lose significance in light of the common cause (Chan, Pun, 2009). Whatever these studies indicate, theories about workers’ networks are highly significant to questions for this study.

From a research perspective, the social life of women factory workers is particularly important to the development of women’s empowerment. What is most revealed in this context about the workers’ lives does not necessarily define specific patterns. The information targeted for this concept point out recent trends among workers, especially in areas of communication. The use of the Internet seems to be a basic privilege, and with regard to work-oriented communication, this dissertation follows incorporate studies that are important in determining how the Internet affects women’s empowerment.

It is completely telling when scholars actually dominate their work with stories that explain the processes behind Internet use whether for information searches or for mere relaxation. A focus on migrant workers and how they use the Internet with
enthusiasm is given by Yinni Peng (2008) who conducted an engaging qualitative study with migrant workers in the city of Shenzhen, examining their different online activities and the impact it had on their social lives. Peng (2008), in her research study, outlined the function of internet cafes, how they appropriate easy computer and internet access to migrant workers who cannot afford the expense of a personal computer and monthly internet service fees, allowing these workers to use the internet for a variety of uses, often utilizing several programs simultaneously. She also reveals a direct link that the internet cafe provides based on an environment where migrant workers can relax and escape the strict conditions of the factory regime. Peng shows that the hierarchy of the factory does not exist in the internet cafes and everyone is simply an internet user, though each still remains a migrant worker. Finding a way to isolate women in this group of workers in order to gain perspective that may be attributed to support networks in the factories is another area of research for this dissertation study.

An important way to define what Peng (2008) shows as major changes in the culture of migrant workers is to engage outcomes and solutions in the research that underscores the consciousness of migrant workers. According to the research, significant users that dominate the cafes and most of the frequent internet café patrons are young migrant workers who had used the Internet before they migrated to Shenzhen, some having learned in middle school or technical school. She states that these young workers spend a great deal of time in the internet cafes, and a significant portion of their monthly salary on equipment for online games. Throughout her study, Peng (2008) finds no significant differences of internet use between genders or levels of incomes; however, she
does produce details that highlight the significance of migrant workers in more leadership positions who use the Internet more for informational searches, while the shop floor workers use the Internet more for entertainment purposes such as watching movies or playing online games.

Apart from online games and internet searches, Peng gives consistent data that shows migrant workers also use the Internet to strengthen their social networks. Unlike expensive long distance calls, many migrant workers use online chat systems, like Tencent QQ and WeChat, for several free services such as online chats, audio calls, video chats, to name a few. Tencent members can also search and request new online friends, thus expanding their online network. Peng (2008) also states that migrant workers create online forums to help construct a sense of identity and belonging. Members of the forum speak their local dialect and can use the forum to “communicate with each other, post information, discuss daily issues, and share their feelings and experiences” (Peng, 2008, p. 51). Peng also intimates that connecting, albeit virtually, with other members from the same area may establish a sense of belonging within the online community and may help lessen feelings of alienation that some workers may feel. Because Peng’s study was published in 2008 and is limited to internet cafes, this dissertation study embraces other forms of modern technology and social media being used by factory women, especially to show how women workers are involved with past and present communication technology. Although internet cafes may still be prevalent in China, in recent years mobile phones with inexpensive data plans have provided easy internet access for the general population. In addition, there has been a recent explosion of various applications
(e.g., WeChat, Meituan, WhatsApp, Alipay) for mobile phones and tablets which provide online chat systems and more. As a result, the dissertation study does not ignore any new technology that takes center stage in the lives of factory workers.

**Chapter Conclusion**

Navigating the many theories of women’s empowerment and agency can be challenging due to its various applications. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that building agency in women and empowering them can happen through various tools and avenues. Additionally, this phenomenon can occur at the individual or collective level. Governmental regulations and family structure may alter the roles and status of women factory workers in China. Finally, connecting through personal and virtual social networks also helps empower these women by establishing a collective spirit that helps to nurture the increase of social capital among these women. This qualitative field study seeks to add to the bevy of literature by addressing these subjects and redefining women’s empowerment in regards to women factory workers in China.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

For the information provided by verbal and non-verbal arts to be maximally reliable, certain design characteristics were incorporated into this dissertation. The researcher, with assistance from an interpreter, conducted interviews from March 2015 through October 2016. These semi-structured interviews with women factory workers were then recorded, transcribed, and translated. Interview times varied; however, most interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. The interviews took place on and off the work sites of the participants. Informed consent was obtained in written form from each participant before the beginning of every interview. Data collected from the interviews were translated and samples of those translations were back translated. Continuous comparisons of data during multiple reviews were made in order to validate any emerging themes, relationships, or interpretations.

Research Design

Good qualitative research requires extensive time as well as careful documentation. This dissertation study was conducted between January 2015 and October 2016. The goal of this dissertation study was to provide a “thick description” (Merriam, 2002, p. 237), and the researcher used various strategies in the analysis in order “to account for the behavior of people and to describe the knowledge that enables them to behave appropriately given the dictates of common sense in their community” (Hatch, 2002, p. 21). The aim was to describe the subculture of the female factory
worker from her inside point of view (Hatch, 2002, p. 21). All of the time spent with the participants was during the informant interviews.

While conducting their research in China, several research scholars who focused on factory workers employed ethnography as their methodology for qualitative study. Pun Ngai (2005) used ethnography when she researched Chinese factory workers for her doctoral study which she ultimately transformed into her book titled Made In China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace. Kang Sun (2012) utilized Institutional Ethnography when conducting his dissertation research regarding the social construction of class identity process of peasant workers in China. Although ethnography has proven to be a successful methodology for this field of investigation, it was not a suitable fit for this researcher. Unlike Ngai and Sun, I was not able to live alongside the workers at their place of employment. In addition, due to their Chinese heritage and fluency in the local language, Ngai and Sun had the ability to appear less conspicuous among the workers. Conversely, I was anything but conspicuous at the factory work sites, or anywhere in China, because of my strikingly different ethnicity and nationality to the general population. Regardless, I felt confident that with some assistance I would be able to connect with my participants. Ann Ryen (2008) stated a similar claim in her article depicting specific challenges of entering and staying in the field while conducting ethnographic research: “In a number of instances both members [researcher and key informant] will evidently draw upon descriptions and inferences that are cultural and context specific and that inform the descriptions and the inferences they actively invoke and draw upon without always being connected” (p.98). Therefore, after careful
deliberation, basic interpretive qualitative study seemed the most suitable qualitative research method for this investigation.

The overall purpose of a basic interpretive qualitative study is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences (Merriam, 2002, p. 38). To accomplish this task, qualitative researchers must be willing to do research that is time intensive and requires active participation with the participants as well as within their community. Interpretative qualitative research is used when researchers want to know about their participants, unlike quantitative research where the researchers remain distant with their subjects, and are more interested in whether or not the subjects in the study were affected by a particular treatment or intervention introduced by the researchers. Merriam (2002) cited a contention by Marshall and Rossman that interpretative qualitative research is for those who wish to understand processes, describe poorly understood phenomena, understand differences between stated and implemented policies or theories, and to discover unspecified contextual variables. To accomplish this task, qualitative researchers must be willing to examine specific contexts and experiences that may not necessarily be generalized to a larger population. Qualitative research provides the opportunity to gain a greater understanding by allowing the participants to speak in their own voice (Walker, 2010).

Only by studying individuals could one get an accurate glimpse of the group. This dissertation study incorporated a cultural context in order to understand the personal goals, relationships, well-being, and achievements of female factory workers in China. In their qualitative analysis study on cross-cultural new media research, Seong Eun Cho and
Han Woo Park (2013, p. 2320-2321) cited Hofstede and Triandis in their discussion regarding the composition of individualistic cultures and social relationships:

According to Hofstede (2001) individualistic cultures are composed primarily of independent and self-oriented individuals who seek personal happiness and the pursuit of private goals. Individual and their needs are the primary standards by which individuals, driven by self-esteem, determine their values, beliefs, and behaviors. In addition, because members are rarely subject to rigid group identities, their social relationships tend to be more loose and flexible. This allows and even encourages individuals to voluntarily create new relationships and freely join or leave a wide range of social groups, using various social behaviors to do so. (Triandis 1989)

This dissertation study sought to discover whether educational opportunities and other tools helped women factory workers in China make more subjective choices, increase their independence, and transform themselves through contravention of archaic protocols. Hence, three research questions were asked for this dissertation study:

1. How do women factory workers in China conceptualize self-concept, power, and agency?

2. What perspectives do these women have of structural opportunities like social networks, work environments, and education?

3. In what ways do Chinese women factory workers overcome obstructions to achievement?
Theoretical Perspective

This basic interpretive qualitative study utilized a constructivist paradigm: “It is through mutual engagement that researchers and respondents construct the subjective reality that is under investigation” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). For this dissertation study, I worked with female factory workers to discover, from their perspectives, what facilitates empowerment in their lives. Mackenzie (1994) argued that researchers utilize data produced from fieldwork as support for emerging categories and theories. Furthermore, Hasse and Trentemoller stated, “Research knowledge is embedded in our theoretical perspective. We are creators of data, but at the same time we have to learn new word meanings from our informants, and that makes us situated learners” (2009, p. 62). They argued that researchers do not define their learning process as negotiating meaning; rather, by opening themselves up to surprises and accidental challenges, expand their established meanings. Thus, an aim of this study was to establish a better understanding of the lives of female factory workers in China and how they foster agency by increasing their self-awareness, sense of independence, and ability to make personal choices while working within the rigorous factory environment. Scholars Dyck, Lynam, and Anderson (1995) cited Bhavnani who “suggests that feminist researchers need to critically assess the ways in which the women of their studies are represented in relation to dominant views and how difference has informed the research” (Dyck, Lynam, Anderson, 1995, p. 612). Although this dissertation was not necessarily considered a feminist research study, the aim of this dissertation was still to show Chinese women factory workers in a different light than previously portrayed. To achieve this aim, this study was designed to
encourage fundamental participant contribution to the study using their world views, values, and beliefs (Regmi, Naidoo, Pilkington, 2010).

**Settings**

This qualitative dissertation study focused on female factory employees from several factories located in the center of the Yangtze River Delta Economic Area, in mainland China. 6Zhejiang province is located in the southeastern part of China. During the late 1970s, the Chinese government established several Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in order to attract foreign investment and trade, expand their ports, and incorporate new technology (Yeung, Lee, Kee, 2009). China now boasts 210 national development zones and 1,346 provincial development zones (Rodrigue, 2017). Years after creation of these SEZs, millions of migrants continue to flock from the rural areas and more impoverished provinces to work at the factories located in these economic areas, such as Zhejiang province. Zhejiang province covers over 386,000 square miles and has a population of approximately 49 million people, comprising of the Han majority, She Hui, Manchu, and other ethnic minorities (China Today, 2017). It is a very prosperous region comprising of local and multinational businesses. Manufacturing industries have rapidly developed in the region, and factories producing garments, textiles, chemicals, machinery and motor vehicles were scattered throughout the area (Yangtze River Delta, 2013). I lived in a prefecture-level city called Huzhou located in the northern part of Zhejiang province. This historical city is famous for its silk, calligraphy brushes, tea, and special

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6 The People’s Republic of China claims jurisdiction over multiples provinces and autonomous regions, including Inner Mongolia, Hong Kong, Macau, Tibet and Taiwan.
bean curd dumplings. The city population surpassed two million people (Huzhou China, 2017); however, it was still considered a small city when compared to metropolitan areas like Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing whose registered populations are in the tens of millions. There a number of factories in the area as well.

Interviews with the participants were conducted both on and off the factory work sites. Many participants chose to be interviewed onsite because it was most convenient for them. Even at the work-site, many interviews were conducted in quiet private areas; however, some interviews were conducted on the production floor because the participants preferred to be interviewed as they worked. Interviews were conducted at four different factories in Zhejiang province. They varied in size and product development. The Dan Ta Manufacturing group is a very large company headquartered in Zhejiang province. It holds large dealings in pharmaceuticals, renewable energy, textiles and finance. I quickly realized that not all factories would look the same. The factory grounds at Dan Ta looked more like an affluent gated estate with a grand hotel as its main headquarters. The interviews were conducted in a plush showroom next to a display showing the evolution of textile production in China. Before conducting this first round of interviews, I foolishly presumed that all the factories would be just an assortment of gray concrete buildings. Not all the factories visited during this study were as elaborate as Dan Ta, but this experience reminded me to not go into these interviews with any preconceptions.

Rojia Mo industries was a large steel factory located on the outskirts of the city. It had multiple entrances with guard stations at each entrance. While touring the grounds I
witnessed mostly men working in the dark gray, fiercely hot buildings, maintaining the enormous furnaces and banging away at large sheets of steel. On the other side of the factory grounds was the company research and development center which was a glass building in front of a colorful sculpture, flower garden, and pond. Interviews at this site were held in a conference room in one of the administrative buildings. The Huo Guo factory focused mainly on science and technology. This factory was located in a small but famous ancient city one hour’s drive away from the city center. It was a compound of multiple cement buildings with one glass building that housed their administrative offices. The production floor consisted of open areas divided into different workstations. Signs in English and Chinese labeled most of the work areas. The day I interviewed the production workers at this site, most of the employees were off for the weekend so the production floor was very quiet.

The final factory site was the Nai Cha textile factory located in another local suburb. Nai Cha was the smallest of the four factories. It only had one four-story building which housed the administrative offices and production floors. The first floor consisted of the loading dock. To meet the participants, my interpreter and I climbed stairs flanked by five-foot-high piles of white fabric. Behind a set of double doors on the second floor was the textile floor where female employees would pull and cut fabric which would then be sent one floor up to the large room filled with at least 30 women sitting behind automatic sewing machines, stitching together curtains, clothing, etc. The women at this factory were extremely friendly and were very eager to participate in the study. The last participant interviews were conducted at the Jiaozhi teahouse located in a
small shopping area near the heart of the city. It was an older teahouse situated close to a large supermarket and above a small cigarette shop. The rooms were small but private. Each room had two striped loveseats and the table in the middle of the room was filled with snacks and small glasses filled with green tea.

**Participants**

The participants were female employees from various factories located in the center of the Yangtze River Delta Economic Area in Zhejiang province. The participants were adult female workers who worked on the assembly lines and in the offices. All the informants in this investigation were Chinese women 21 years and older. Initially, employees who were foremen, or are in any other level of management, were to be excluded from this study, hence reducing the possibility of the line workers (who work under them) to be coerced by any higher-ranking employee. However, one employee who was in management was included in this report because she began her tenure at the factory working as a production line worker. The researcher also worked diligently to enforce strict confidentiality policies between her, the participants, as well as any translators who assisted her with the dissertation study. Table 1 shows a brief demographic of the participants interviewed.
Table 1. Participant demographic information

The women in this investigation differed from the women factory workers depicted in previous studies. The average age of the women factory workers in this report was 37 years old. This mean age is a reflection of the aging workforce in the Zhejiang area. Another surprising trend that arose from this study was that the majority of the participants were not migrants. Ma Danning (2015) warned that the percentage of factory workers has steadily increased from 30 percent of migrant workers in 2008 to 43.5 percent of migrants in 2014. Some workers from this investigation did migrate from provinces such as Shaanxi province in North China, and as far south as Yunnan province; however, most of the participants were native to the area. The majority of the participants were married and have at least one child. Some participants had more than one child—one participant had three children—which was not typical at the time of this study due to
the one-child policy invoked by the Chinese government. The majority of participants asked did not live at home with their parents, which also coincided with the current development of family households in China becoming more nuclear. Educational levels varied a great deal; however, most of the office workers had at least some post-secondary education while the production floor workers possessed at least a primary school level of education.

**Sampling**

Twenty-four women volunteered and were interviewed for this dissertation research study. Even though the group of participants were racially homogenous, there was a diversity among them, including social status, education levels, backgrounds, and experiences (Dyck, Lynam, Anderson, 1995). Rigorous sampling procedures were used for this qualitative study; thus, obtaining a sufficient sample size for generalizing and replicating this study would be superfluous (Mackenzie, 1994).

This dissertation study employs convenience sampling as well as snowball sampling techniques. “Sampling techniques should take account of the purpose of the research, for example to develop categories” (Mackenzie, 1994, p.777). Convenience sampling worked well for this qualitative dissertation study because the women were able to participate without any threat of recourse or promise of incentive. Mao Yuping (2010) claimed that Chinese employees typically hesitate to participate in measures that may not

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7 Since the mid-1970s, most Chinese families, with few exceptions, were only allowed to have one child. If they had another child, they would face a steep fine. Although over the past few years the Chinese government had gradually relaxed the law, the one-child policy officially ended on January 1, 2016 (Phillips, 2017)
directly affect them; however, the women that participated were very forthcoming when sharing their experiences. Mackenzie (1994) noted that beneficial informants must not only fit the criteria of the study but must also be willing to examine and discuss their experiences. The willingness of these women to share their experiences with me was crucial to success of this research study. The eagerness to share created unexpected consequences at one work site. At the Nai Cha textile factory, the women workers unintentionally caused a snowball sampling effect. The workers were so excited to see a foreigner, they eagerly answered my questions and encouraged their coworkers to be the next to speak. For some women, the chance to speak with a foreigner was enough to participate in the study; others thought it was a good chance for others to learn about Chinese women and their experience, dreams, and values. These varied reasons for participating in the study positively, rather adversely, influenced the research study.

During the conception of this field-site based study, the researcher planned to become actively involved in the factory community. The original intent was to spend several hours a week at a neutral location generally conversing with women factory workers, possibly offering to tutor them in English. Meetings would be conducted in Standard Chinese with the help of an interpreter. The interpreter would be a graduate student from a local university and would have no personal relationship with any of the participants. Multiple times during the week, the researcher would provide English tutoring to the participants and English lesson plans would detail the lesson and activities for each tutoring session. Spending a substantial amount of time near the factory site would provide the researcher time to observe the environment, make friends with the
workers, and become a regular presence near the site. The participants for the study would be selected from those who the researcher met and those who volunteered for tutoring. The tutoring would be conducted in English by the researcher. Participants who chose to exchange time and take English language tutoring, would gain knowledge of the English language as well as the unspecified cultural awareness benefits from long-time interaction with someone outside that typically homogenous community; however, there would be no direct material benefits, other than an occasional coffee. Hence, the research process would not be impacted. Then again, once I arrived and began living in the target research area, plans for recruitment and sampling participants drastically changed.

Due to the geography of the research area, meeting participants on my own for this qualitative study would have been nearly impossible. In another city in Zhejiang province, it would have been fairly easy to encounter factory workers because there were factories with no guard stations located right across the street from a local high school and there were small restaurants nearby. Conversely, the factories in the research area of this dissertation study were not so conveniently accessible. I lived and worked as a teacher at a local vocational college closer to the center of the city. Most of the factories were located on the outskirts. In addition, there were no cafes or general public areas right across from the factories; instead, there were only tiny stalls with local vendors. Also, all factory entrances had some sort of manned security guard station which could have also hindered any attempts to approach any factory workers leaving the premises. Another attempt to attract workers was done through advertising. I created a poster with my picture and contact information; the poster was translated into Standard Chinese and asked for
volunteers for the qualitative study, and included an offer to receive free English lessons. My Australian friend who owned the company put up the poster in the lunchroom of his local furniture factory. I never received a single response.

Therefore, I adopted a top-down approach by networking with factory owners, teachers, and other professionals, in order to obtain access to interview factory workers. I was introduced to the first set of factory workers through a chain of circumstances. During a social function I met another foreign teacher, named Gilles Meira, who also lived in the area. Gilles and I developed a friendship and he offered to invite his students, some of whom worked in the factories, to participate in the study. I also gained access to second group of factory workers through an unusual connection of individuals. Through a mutual friend, I met Luke, a British English teacher, who just opened a school with his former girlfriend Amy. Amy was a criminal lawyer native to the area. When we met she was excited about my study and eagerly used her connections to arrange access to a factory her friend owned. Regrettably, the time I scheduled to visit the factory, Amy advised me that all the workers had gone home for their holiday break. Therefore, Amy introduced me to her friend Miller, who worked at the Huo Guo factory. Fortunately, Miller was able to provide immediate access to the factory and some of the workers at the site. Finally, I acquired access to the other two factories through my colleague Jiang Guiqin, known to me as “Sunshine,” at the vocational college where I taught English. Sunshine and I shared an office, and we became good friends. She routinely partnered with some factories in the area and acted as a liaison by using her existing connections to
gain access for me to the factories. Her assistance was instrumental to this research study.

**Role of the Researcher**

For the same reason, we also do not define the learning process of the researcher (and possibly also the informant) as a negotiation of meaning, but rather a process in which surprises challenge and expand the established meaning of the researcher. Thus, this method requires the researcher’s possibility and ability to let herself be surprised. It should be noted that this way of being surprised is in fact rare and somewhat accidental, even when the deliberate aim is to use the method of culture contrast. (Hasse, Trentemoller, 2009, p. 63)

**The Challenges and Benefits of Being a Laowai**

As a curious Black American living in a lesser known city in China, my interaction with the local populous manifested constructive and challenging experiences. Many non-Asians did not live in the city; at times I felt like I was the only foreign national within the surrounding area. Over time, I learned to cope with the majority of stares I received everywhere I went. Once a group of staff employees in blue shirts and khaki pants followed me around the supermarket, hovering and peeking around the edge of the aisle to get a glimpse of the foreigner, the *laowai*. From these types of experiences, I learned to be extremely patient, never to assume anything, and to remember that these locals were curious, not malicious—if they saw me multiple times, the novelty of this foreigner would eventually wane. During this investigation, I adopted an ethnorelative lens which

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8 Laowai is the Standard Chinese term for foreigner or outsider.
allowed me to appreciate many values and behaviors as cultural rather than universal (Connerley, 2005). In addition, I tried to enter these the interviews without any assumptions and tried to make sure that my interpreter went in with no assumptions as well.

At times my novelty as a loawai or waiguoren9 was advantageous to the study. Some participants only joined the study because they wanted a chance to communicate with a non-native Chinese individual. Many of these women had never seen, let alone met, a foreign person face-to-face. Therefore, some participants agreed to be interviewed solely because they were excited at having a chance to speak with a foreigner. In June 2015, I went to visit the Nai Cha textile factory. When my interpreter and I walked onto production floor, all work stopped. The female workers gawked and crowded around me, following me from station to station. Some women took pictures of me; one woman tugged at my clothes, and another woman pulled one of the blank consent forms out of my hand and began reading it. Even the two lone men working at the loading station came inside to gaze at the laowai, then went back outside to finish their work once they had satisfied their curiosity. Amidst the pandemonium, my interpreter explained to the women the purpose for our visit. Several women volunteered to be interviewed. They enthusiastically answered the questions and conscripted their friends to be interviewed next, causing a snowball sampling to take effect. I went to the Nai Cha factory hoping to interview at least four women. That day I interviewed 13 women.

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9 Waiguoren literally means “foreign person” in Standard Chinese
There were times, however, when my identity as a *laowai* did not work in my favor. In fact, I was denied access to one factory because I was not Chinese. I had befriended Alpha who owned Gan Bei Manufacturing, a textile factory in the local area. When I told him about my study, initially he was very eager to have me come to his factory and interview his workers. When I began scheduling my interviews, I contacted Alpha to see when my interpreter and I could visit his factory. Suddenly, access to his factory was not so readily available. He kept saying that he would have to get back to me with a good time. Finally, after my relentless prodding for definitive answer, Alpha told me that he actually shared ownership with two other men, and those partners were extremely nervous to have a foreigner visit their factory. That month one of their employees broke her leg at the site, and the other owners refused to allow any “outsiders” to talk to their workers. I learned through this incident that I could not assume that my status as a foreigner would automatically provide access to participants. Gaining access to participants in a culture that is not my own was a challenge that could not be taken lightly.

**Researcher Rapport With the Participants**

Even though the participant, the researcher, and the interpreter had vastly different backgrounds, they possessed common bond as women. Dyck, Lynam, Anderson asserted the following, “An underlying assumption is that the women in the research, as researcher and subject, will be able to talk readily on the common ground of women’s experiences in a widely-based gendered division of labour” (Dyck, Lynam, Anderson, 1995, p. 614). Through conversational style interviews, the participants and
researcher were able to discover collective experiences and different influences in each other’s lives (Ryen, 2008). For instance, one respondent and I were both Christians. Other fieldwork studies involved the researchers establishing lasting relationships with the participants by spending significant time with them and meeting with them multiple times. According to Mackenzie, “Fieldwork procedures involve not only initial access but also the ongoing maintenance of relationships” (1994, p. 779). During this dissertation study, contact with most of the participants did not extend beyond the initial access and interview. Nevertheless, the investigator established a friendship with one of the participants in the study who spoke English and has maintained contact with her. Attempts to establish a rapport with the participants were further complicated by the use of a third party. The majority of the women interviewed did not speak English; therefore, an interpreter was crucial to establishing a nonhierarchical relationship of mutual respect between the researcher and respondents, where the women felt they could communicate freely and negotiate knowledge together (Dyck, Lynam, Anderson, 1995). Even though a third party joined this study, I as the researcher took great effort to build a rapport with the participants using nonverbal cues such as smiling and open body language, and basic Standard Chinese phrases.

Dyck, Lynam, and Anderson (1995) contend that by conducting these in-depth interviews, researchers are intruding the private lives, so it is imperative that the participants know that they exert control of interviews in the field. Thus, to settle any concerns of the women, I made it a priority to ensure that the women in this investigation felt safe answering the questions, and they knew that they had the power to end the
interview at any time. Only a few instances of resistance occurred during the interview process. During the visit at the Huo Guo factory in Nanxun, one participant complained that there were too many questions. At that point, the researcher and interpreter immediately shortened the interviewed by asking less questions in order to accommodate the participant and show that she had the power to negotiate the dialogue. This compromise showed the participant that she had the power to exert control over the interview process.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from March 2015 through October 2016. This period worked best for data collection because the workers had recently returned from the Spring Festival holiday. All interviews were recorded, then the audio files were transcribed into simplified Chinese, and finally translated into English. Data were collected from the translated interviews; samples of those translations were back translated. During the initial analysis of the interview transcripts, any pitfalls that could affect the research process (Dyck, Lynam, Anderson, 1995) were highlighted and remedied before a deeper analysis was conducted.

**Constructing the Interview Guide**

The interview protocol was created by first examining the research questions to ensure consistency between the conceptual framework, research questions, and interview questions. The interview protocol was constructed by the researcher in order to “narrow the range of possibilities for interpretation” while still allowing the researcher to be open to change and discovery” during the data collection process (Weston, Gandell,
Beauchamp, McAlphine, Wiseman, and Beauchamp, 2001, p.384-385). A cursory review of common job interview questions served as an inspirational basis for the interview questions. Guidance for construction of the interview questions emerged by reviewing existing literature and previous studies to identify various gaps and themes not yet addressed by previous researchers, thus producing more meaningful data (Jacob, Furgeson, 2012). Multiple revisions were conducted to ensure correlations between the interview protocol and the aims of the research questions. Upon final submission, approval of the interview protocol and research study was granted by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board.

The interview protocol consisted of a script introducing the interview process, obtaining consent, transitioning between topics of interest, and concluding the interview. Having a script helped maintain some consistency among the interviews (Jacob, Furgeson, 2012). To ensure mutual understanding of the interview questions, the questions were reviewed and test piloted with the interpreter. Since she was a member of the population, albeit not that specific community, she was able to make one or two suggestions to clarify any vague questions or complex terms the participants otherwise may not have understood.

The questions in the interview guide were prearranged from simple background inquiries to more in depth, thought provoking questions regarding familial roles, handling conflict in the workplace, etc. The aim of the background questions was to obtain basic demographic information about the participants; in addition, asking these simple questions helped build a rapport with the women and put them at ease (Jacob, Furgeson,
2012). At times during the interview, the researcher would listen carefully to the women speak about themselves, and interject with a compliment or statement to the participant remarks. For instance, one participant who seemed very nervous at the beginning of the interview stated that she was 46 years old. At that moment, I told the participant, “Really? You look so young.” She smiled. Her apprehension waned and she appeared much more relaxed for the remainder of the interview. Some questions included phrasing asking participants to describe various scenarios. The phrase “tell me about” evoked the interviewees to tell a story. Jacob and Furgeson state, “It keeps the question general enough that the interviewee can take the question in several directions and leaves room for ideas, impressions, and concepts which you have not thought of to emerge from the data” (2012, p. 4). Broader questions were asked to allow room for surprise information that could be used in the investigation. To maintain focus throughout each interview, prompts were employed through the interview protocol. Once the interviews began, adjustments were made to the interview protocol along the way, allowing for the scheme of the study to develop, thus adding new questions for future interviews regarding any information uncovered during the previous interviews (Jacob, Furgeson, 2012). In addition, some questions were modified as became necessary during the interview process. “As modifications are suggested or existing questions are confirmed the original list of questions should be edited and annotated” (Chenail, 2009, p. 18). Some questions were modified for clarity; at other times the interview protocol was modified to acclimate to the environment where the interviews took place. Overall, the interview protocol stayed fairly consistent to the original protocol submitted with the dissertation proposal.
Obtaining Consent

“Before the interview ensues, the interviewer as interviewee should review the consent form and note any unclear or confusing passages and then sign the form before beginning the recording.” (Chenail, 2009, p.17). The research team made certain to obtain informed consent from each participant. Consent was obtained immediately after general introductions and preceded the start of every interview. A consent form was given to each participant. All forms given to the participants had been translated into Standard Chinese by the interpreter who assisted with the data collection. The participants were given time to thoroughly read the form and ask any questions about the interview process (Jacob, Furgeson, 2012). The Informed Consent form listed the title of the study as well as the purpose of study. The consent form also stated that the participant would receive no direct benefit from the study; there were no anticipated risks, and no identifying information would be collected (Rabionet, 2011). Finally, the consent form stated that the participant may choose not to participate or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. After gaining informed consent from the women, the interviews were undertaken (Twinn, 1997) in Standard Chinese, or the local dialect, and audio-taped.

Audiotaping

All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder which was tested before each interview commenced. In the beginning stages of data collection, some interviews were also recorded via cellphone as a backup (Jacob, Furgeson, 2012). All recording devices were tested multiple times by the researcher before any interview sessions. Audiotaping
the interviews provided an indispensable benefit for this cross-cultural study. The translator listened to the audio files to translate the recorded conversations into English, and the back translator listened to the same audio recordings to verify the accuracy of the English translation. The quality of the audio recordings was extremely important to the researcher; therefore, locations of the interviews had to be “quiet, safe, and non-threatening” (Jacob, Furgeson, 2012, p. 7). With the exception of the Nai Cha factory site, most interviews were held in quiet atmospheres such as conference rooms, offices, quiet work areas, and private teahouse rooms. Notes were taken throughout the interview process (Rabionet, 2011). Notes were taken prior to most interviews. During the first two factory visits, the researcher took handwritten notes during the interviews. After returning from each research site, follow up notes and reflections were written as a supplement to the audio recordings. These notes also provided a description of the research site and any feelings the researcher experienced during the data collection.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

The aim of the interviews was to see what categories emerged from the dialogues, rather than trying to adjust the interviews to match predesigned categories (Ryen, 2008). The goal was to discover the different viewpoints and experiences of women factory workers sharing their stories. “Skilled interviewers can gain insight into lived experiences, learn the perspectives of individuals, participating in a study, and discover the nuances in stories” (Jacob, Furgeson, 2012, p. 1). Jacob and Fergeson (2012) purported that the researcher is responsible for ensuring that everyone involved in the study has a realistic expectation regarding the length of the interview, and that
distractions during the interview should be kept to a minimum. This lesson was learned during the data collection process. I had previously established these expectations with my interpreter, but not the respondents. This triggered some resistance from the respondents during the interviews at the Huo Guo factory. During two interviews at the site, one participant complained to the interpreter that there were so many questions; another participant kept looking at her watch halfway through the interview. In both instances, the interpreter and I agreed to shorten the length of the interviews to accommodate those interviewees. As the interview process commenced, I learned that even though the office workers I previously interviewed did not object to the amount of questions asked, most of the assembly workers that I interviewed would most likely feel that the questions were too many; therefore, I made additional adjustments before the next round of interviews.

General structure of the interview included an opening statement, some general questions to elicit conversation, and a number of targeted questions to probe for information grounded in the research questions. The interviews were conducted conversational style so the participants felt comfortable enough to talk about themselves without obstruction (Jagne, Duncker, Smith, 2006). It was extremely important to connect with the participants during the interviews by using nonverbal cues and speaking minimal Standard Chinese responses to help make the participants feel more at ease sharing their stories. Baumgartner (2012) asserts that methodical preparation may be sufficient to elicit quality interviews from more outspoken respondents; however, the author claims that interviews with more introverted respondents requires the interviewer
to “lead and guide an interview – an ability which, in turn, would considerably depend on the fluency of the interviewer in the inquiry language” (p.10). Meticulous preparation plus allowance for flexibility, by both the researcher and interpreter, yielded quality data for this study. Despite the consistency of the interview protocol, some interviews were more successful than others—after all, not all participants were as forthcoming as others. Regardless, all participants were advised of the interview process. Moreover, at the end of the interview all participants were advised of the next step following the interview.

**Observation in Field Notes**

Field notes were taken by the researcher throughout the data collection process. The purpose of the field notes was to provide a written record of any observations, reflections, and experiences deemed noteworthy by the researcher. Various encounters and relationships between the researcher and participants were recorded as well. Field notes were documented before, during and after visitation to the research sites. Some field notes were handwritten on pieces of paper while other notes were typed directly into a computer file. The content included details regarding physical appearance of research sites and respondents. During a number of interviews, the researcher wrote notes regarding the participants’ mannerisms, body language, and changes in behavior that occurred during the interview. Any events and actions or actions that took place in the research settings were also recorded in the field notes. Those notes included the type of event, the participants involved, the nature of their actions, and any other details that provided context for the event. The researcher also used field notes to reflect her personal account of what she learned from the data collection, including any feelings,
problems, ideas, impressions, and plans for future exploration. Those reflective notes helped established the origination of ideas, provide clarification, and demonstrate the thought process of the researcher. Any notes taken during the observation were immediately transferred to a password protected file once the researcher returned to her private residence. All field research notes were kept in a research journal in an encrypted Word Doc file.

**Conducting a Cross-Cultural Study**

To some extent, this research study took an anthropological approach. “The anthropologist travels across the world to plunk himself down in the senses, and then he transforms that experience into a new theory by thinking and getting a feeling about it” (Bolker, 1998, p.15). I travelled from the United States to China to conduct a cross-cultural qualitative dissertation study and immersed myself in Chinese society in hopes of discovering more about the remarkable community of factory women. Pranee Liampittong (2010) warned that although cross-cultural research may be an exciting experience, researchers conducting this type of research would encounter methodological challenges and issues. The writer stated that researchers must “employ culturally sensitive and empathetic approaches which take into consideration the issues and problems which are important for the people who participate in the research” (Liampittong, 2010, p. 17). For this study, a conscious effort was made to reevaluate and think about the cultural influences that drives one’s behavior and practices. “To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect
for the people of other cultures” (Bhawuk, Brislin, 1992, p. 416). I learned through previous experience to adjust fairly well when immersed in a different environment or culture; however, there were times when I have witnessed an action and my first instinct was to condemn it even though I understood the concept underlining the behavior. Liamputtong contended that researchers must “understand the meanings and interpretations that people give to their behavior” (2010, p.19) in order to truly understand it. Therefore, it was critical during this study to remember that just because one is comfortable with certain practices; it does not mean that those practices are best practices for everyone. Liamputtong also asserted that researchers must be flexible in their approach; the writer cited one instance where a researcher decided to hold focus groups instead of personal interviews because the participants did not feel safe to speak freely in a one-on-one interview setting. The interview arrangements for this dissertation remained flexible in the same manner.

Liamputtong continues the discussion by revealing two methodologies to help overcome intercultural issues while conducting cross-cultural qualitative research: healing methodology and decolonizing methodology. The healing methodology incorporates several key principles—unconditional love, compassion, gratitude, reciprocity and ritual—and by using this methodology researchers would gain a deeper understanding and care for their participants because they viewed the participants as human beings. The decolonizing methodology attempts to change culturally insensitive research practices which have damaged indigenous communities in the past; decolonizing methodology “strives to empower indigenous communities and respect their culture and traditions”
(Liamputtong, 2013, p.23) through participatory action research. Both of these methodologies, Liamputtong said, work to ensure that participants in the research study benefit from the research and are not harmed by it. This dissertation incorporated the healing methodology by respecting the participants as human beings who were generous enough to share their perspectives, experiences, and stories with a stranger.

Researchers Kathleen Norr and Yoko Shimpuku (2012) also argued the complexities involved while conducting cross-cultural research; their systematic literature reviewed analyzed qualitative research studies performed in various Tanzanian communities. They revealed that cultural differences between the research and the participants add complexity, particularly during the interpretive process, and that critical evaluation of a cross-cultural qualitative study requires a thorough understanding of how the interpreter is integrated into the research process (Norr, Shimpuku, 2012). Conducting a study in a culture outside one’s own was a challenging task at best for this researcher. At times it was very difficult to be brave in a country where I did not fluently speak the language. It took weeks of building up courage for me to venture to the grocery store and restaurants alone. I was too scared to order anything, but eventually I forced myself to brave the waters, study Chinese, and independently travel around the city. Cho and Park quoted Seitz (1993) saying, “When qualitative research methods are used to examine a new cultural situation, they can provide insight and in-depth knowledge about the phenomena involved (quoted in Seong Eun Cho, Han Woo Park, 2011, p. 2320). Thus, this dissertation study contributes to continuing research of women factory workers, both methodologically and empirically, by considering the cultural context of the participants
as well as the extent of cultural effects on the researcher and data collected during the study.

It was critical that the researcher was not the only person gaining great benefit from this cross-cultural research study. Liamputtong (2010) required his research to take a culturally sensitive and empathic approach which would reflect the issues and problems that the participants in the study considered important. Development of this qualitative research study adopted a similar approach by making certain that the participants were not neglected during their involvement in the study. It was important to respect the cultural integrity and values of her participants, thus not leaving any individuals vulnerable to coercion, punishment, or harm. Moreover, Liamputtong maintains that quality cross-cultural research is centered on meaning and interpretation, which requires the research to be more flexible and open to multiple interpretations. “For most qualitative researchers, it is accepted that in order to understand people’s behavior, we must attempt to understand the meanings and interpretations that people give to their behavior (Liamputtong, 2010, p. 18-19). For example, while this research study did not make use of focus groups, all participants had the option to come to the interview location accompanied by a friend if the women did not feel comfortable conversing with the researcher alone. It was very important to the researcher that the women who participated in the study did not feel intimated or scared. In addition, to help dissipate any trepidation the participants had about communicating with a foreign researcher, an interpreter acted as a liaison and spoke directly to the participants.
Working With an Interpreter

Baumgartner (2012) contended that researchers were rarely fluent in the language of the communities where they were conducting their studies. I was no exception. Soon after I arrived in China, I realized in order to be able speak with my participants in my study I needed an in Standard Chinese interpreter who was versed in both Standard Chinese and the local dialect. I could not speak Standard Chinese fluently; I could not speak the local Chinese dialect at all. This lack of fluency in the native tongue of my participants put the study at risk. Misunderstandings in communication between the researchers and the respondents could have easily derailed the interview process. Neither party would feel comfortable enough to speak freely, thus making the interview feel scripted and unnatural (Baumgartner, 2012). Employing an interpreter significantly lowered these risks. However, the role of the interpreter involved much more than just verbally translating what each party said. In their research article about working with interpreters, Shimpuku and Norr (2011) purported that cross-cultural language exchange was a deeply complex process. They argued that “the interpreter’s role involves a complex social and cognitive process that influences the findings of the study” (Shimpuku and Norr, 2011, p. 1692). In this study, the participants and the researcher were from two very different cultures. According to Shimpuku and Norr (2011), this added a multifaceted layer to the use of an interpreter—the researcher was further distanced through the communication via a third party. They defined an interpreter as the following, “We defined an interpreter as a person who contributes to the verbal and cultural interpretation of information about the research topics to the researchers and
were often called ‘research assistants’ or ‘field-workers’” (Shimpuku, Norr, 2011, p. 1692). This dissertation study employed the same definition when choosing an interpreter.

During the data collection process, researchers must be explicit regarding the role of their interpreters. Before obtaining an interpreter, I decided how much influence I wanted the interpreter to have on the study. The interpreter was an integral person during the data collection process, and her particular style of interviewing could have affected the research process, expressly through her communication with the participants.

If the style of interpreting is active, then the interpreter’s role will be more than just translating. Initially establishing a trusting relationship between the three parties is crucial. Interpreters see it as their role to make the environment as comfortable as possible, using smiling and appropriate body language to relax interviewees and reassure them. Their understanding of culture and the community is also helpful. Interviewees are often interested in who the interpreter is and may ask for their opinions before consenting to take part in the research (Plumridge, Redwood, Greenfield, Akhter, Chowdhury, Khalade, Gill, 2012, p. 190).

Depending on his or her style, the interpreter may adopt multiple roles. Shimpuku and Norr (2011) discussed different aspects of the styles of interpreters, but the authors of the article solely focused on the aspect of "independence." They wrote, “The first aspect, ‘independence’, is whether the interpreters have an independent role and dominate the interview or work as a conduit with the lead of the researcher. The second aspect,
‘verbatim’, is whether the interpreters use ‘word-by-word’ translation or free translation with their judgment and cultural interpretation. (Shimpuku, Norr, 2011, p. 1695).

Effective interpreters may blend these different styles or utilize these aspects separately, depending on the situation. However, the style used by the interpreter may affect the research; therefore, it is paramount that the researcher and interpreter decide on the primary style of interpretation before the interview process begins. Plumridge (2012) and colleagues discussed the challenges in the planning and protocol faced when working with an interpreter. They argued that the challenges can be minimized by considering and preparation for any pitfalls that may occur during the interview process. Hence, participation role and interpretation style were greatly considered before employing an interpreter for this investigation. Moreover, these issues were discussed at length with the interpreter throughout the data collection process.

I chose to hire Huang Xiaonan—known to me as Sabrina (her English name)—to be my interpreter during the data collection process. Sabrina was my colleague. We both worked in the English department at the vocational college and she taught me Standard Chinese twice a week, depending on our schedules. I felt that working with a female interpreter would help ensure comfort of the participants. “Matching some characteristics is likely to help the interviewee identify with the interpreter” (Plumridge, Redwood, Greenfield, Akhter, Chowdhury, Khalade, Gill, 2012, p. 190). At the time of this study, Sabrina was 31 years old, married, and had a two-year-old son. She was a very petite woman, wore glasses and spoke softly. Sabrina obtained her bachelor’s degree in English and had studied abroad at the University of Nottingham in England. She was
fluent in the local dialect, Standard Chinese, and English. Even though Sabrina did not have experience with this type of research work, she was native to the area and could easily build rapport with people, which was a great benefit to this investigation. Sabrina and I had already built a friendship before we began collecting data together. We spent the previous months collaborating on working projects; we also spent time together outside school. These experiences already demonstrated that Sabrina and I worked well together, so she was my first choice as an interpreter. Working with Sabrina helped overcome intercultural issues. Although her educational background was very different from the interviewees, Sabrina had a similar social background which helped build camaraderie with the respondents; this may have helped motivate the participants to freely share stories about themselves they most likely would not share with a stranger (Shimpuku, Norr, 2011). Additionally, I tried to maintain a friendly and open rapport with the respondents through verbal and non-verbal cues (Plumridge, Redwood, Greenfield, Akhter, Chowdhury, Khalade, Gill, 2012). I smiled, maintained open body language, and used active listening techniques to show that I was interested in what they had to say.

According to Shimpuku and Norr, “It is important for researchers to work with interpreters in a way that enhances understanding of what participants actually said and shares sufficient detail about this aspect of the research for readers to evaluate the rigour of the study” (2011, p. 1692). Before we even scheduled the first interview, Sabrina and I discussed the aims of my research and her role in the data collection process. She reviewed the interview protocol and translated the interview questions into Standard
Chinese. She discussed ways to avoid any potential pitfalls or misunderstandings. We set a tentative schedule for interviews. There was a mutual understanding about the goals of the research study, the confidential nature of research, her responsibilities as interpreter, and my concerns as the researcher (Shimpuku, Norr, 2011). Sabrina took an active approach when interviewing the respondents. At times, if the participant misunderstood the scripted question, she would explain the context or directly ask her own simplified question in order to obtain more in-depth information, as well as maintain a conversational feel to the semi-structured interviews. Plumridge and associates asserted that once the interpreter understands the aims of the interview and its questions, he or she becomes a more active model during the interview process (Plumridge, Redwood, Greenfield, Akhter, Chowdhury, Khalade, Gill, 2012). Nonetheless, Sabrina stayed on topic during all interviews, thus maintaining a marginal effect on the validity of the data.

Various details of the interviews were carefully considered by both the researcher and the interpreter, including the placement of the individuals at the interviews. Seated interviews followed the recommended triangular seating arrangement where everyone could see each other (Plumridge, Redwood, Greenfield, Akhter, Chowdhury, Khalade, Gill, 2012). During standing interviews, researcher and interpreter stood side-by-side so the respondent could focus on both people instead of just on the interpreter. Introductions from the interpreter always included some brief background information of the researcher, the interpreter, and study. It was paramount that the researcher be visibly present and involved during each interview. Actually, my presence provided an added benefit to the data collection process. Cross-cultural researchers contend “that being
foreign and not understanding the language might create the impression of being harmless and ignorant, which might encourage participants to offer information.” (Shimpuku, Norr, 2011, p. 1702). Similarly, Peter Hessler (2010) in his book *Country Driving* discussed an instance where two Chinese bosses automatically assumed that he did not understand the language, so they felt comfortable enough to speak freely. During this dissertation study, I experienced the same feeling when meeting with the factory women. I could see that the participants felt that my presence was innocuous. I also thought it was imperative to maintain a friendly and open rapport with the participants through application of verbal and non-verbal cues like open body language and smiling. Additionally, because the researcher was aware of possible cultural differences between the research protocol and participants, and discussed these differences with the interpreter before the interview process began, it allowed the interpreter to work more efficiently to collect data.

Periodic meetings with the interpreter took place throughout the data collection process. Sometimes Sabrina and I would talk in my office at school; we would also meet briefly before and after every interview session. During these meetings we discussed the location, agenda, and number of participants for each interview. At times, Sabrina also performed the role of liaison. She negotiated the time and location of two interview sessions with Sunshine. After each interview, we would discuss what we observed during the interviews, evaluate the overall experience, and any changes that should be made before the next round of interviews. As the interpreter, Sabrina was very visible during the data collection process: her participation and advice were invaluable. Since
we already had a firm friendship, she felt comfortable enough to voice her opinions. For instance, after the first round of interviews, Sabrina suggested that adjusting the wording and adding some concrete examples to a few of the questions in the interview protocol would help the participants more easily understand the context and the question itself. Implementing her suggestions helped increase communication with the participants and the remaining interviews progressed much more smoothly. Shimpuku and Norr argued that this type of collaboration between researcher and interpreter helps incorporate the “researcher’s conceptual insights and the interpreters’ cultural expertise” into the data collection process (Shimpuku, Norr, 2011, p. 1703). Moreover, the aptitude of working with such a proficient interpreter made translation of the collected data much more effective.

Lost in Translation: Transcription, Forward Translation, and Back Translation

After the interviews concluded, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed into Standard Chinese. Regmi, Naidoo, and Pilkington (2010) suggested that when conducting a cross-cultural study, every “transcript should then be translated into the target language” (p. 20). I tried to follow this strategy, but something went wrong during the translation of the Standard Chinese transcripts. The intention was to submit the written transcripts to another individual who would then translate the transcripts into English. Transcribing interviews is very intensive and time consuming process. I transcribed one interview (the only one conducted in English). The other interviews were transcribed, and later translated over the course of a few weeks. Originally, I chose a fellow colleague Li Dang (Angela) to transcribe the audio files into Standard Chinese.
She was another English teacher who worked in my department. After Angela arranged to transcribe the files, her schedule suddenly changed and she was too busy to transcribe the files herself. Therefore, with my permission, Angela hired three female third-year Chinese students from our school to transcribe the files. All the recorded interviews were transcribed. Upon completion and submission of the written transcripts, the students were paid and I sent the files to my translator to translate the interviews from Standard Chinese to English.

**Forward Translation**

Regmi, Naidoo, and Pilkington (2010) cited a 1998 study by Emmel which advocated using multiple researchers to check audio files against the written transcripts as the sole way to ensure accuracy. Implementing this strategy helped navigate a severe obstacle that arose during the translation phase of this dissertation. I employed Yao Xianfeng, known to me as Oliver (his English name) to translate the written transcripts from Standard Chinese into English. Once Oliver received the written transcripts, he contacted me immediately to inform me that there was a problem: he found multiple errors in the transcripts. To resolve this issue, I sent the audio files to Oliver and he translated each interview directly from the audio files into written English transcripts. This incident illustrated the crucial importance of having highly-qualified individuals to provide a checks and balances system for a cross-cultural study. If Oliver had not quickly identified and resolved the errors regarding the transcripts, the data collected for this study could have been significantly affected.
I was very deliberate in choosing Oliver as my forward translator for this study. Oliver and I have been friends for several years. He teaches English fulltime at a vocational college in Shaoxing, a neighboring city in Zhejiang province. In addition, he is multilingual and holds a master’s degree in English translation. Oliver followed some basic rules. He translated verbatim as much as possible, while still conforming the text to the general rules of English grammar. The aim was to follow Brislin’s (1970) forward-translation model as the translation procedures for this qualitative research study. Brislin suggested recruiting one bilingual individual to translate the qualitative research texts, such as interview transcripts, from the source language (Chinese) into the target language (English). Another bilingual person would back-translate the documents from English back to Standard Chinese, and finally both versions would be compared to check for accuracy. Any discrepancies would then be negotiated between the two bilingual translators (Brislin, 1970). I was fortunate enough to befriend a highly qualified translator, Oliver, and a separate back translator who caught the few nuances he missed. The translator and back translator checked for these distinctions just in case anything was missed during the fast pace of the interviews. I did not have intimate knowledge of the source language and culture, therefore I relied on on my translator, and back translator to reveal cultural nuances, matching values, and idioms. Baumgartner rightly argues, “Translated” data lacks some of the language-inherent and language-specific nuances and shades, which, in turn, may result in a limited or even incorrect understanding of the key experiences narrated in the specific interview” (Baumgartner, 2012, p.12). To minimalize the chance of this potential loss of data happening, I employed a back
translator to review a sample of the English transcripts, while listening to the Standard Chinese audio files.

**Back Translation**

The back translation procedures for this study varied slightly from Brislin’s model. I asked my friend Li Li, known to me as Salina, to perform the back translation for this dissertation study. I met Salina while working a part-time teaching job in a neighboring county. Like Sabrina, Selina was also bilingual and a native of the local area. In addition, she taught English at the local university next door to the vocational college where I worked. The authors (2010) argue that “a good practice for translation is to employ at least two competent bilingual translators who might be familiar with the research, one to translate forward and another to translate back to the original language without having seen the original text (Regmi, Naidoo, Pilkington, 2010 p. 21). I provided Salina with the written English transcripts of some of the interviews. Salina listened to the original audio files and verified the accuracy of the English translations, making only a few minor changes in the wording of the responses of one or two interviews. These multiple checks for cultural meanings and nuances were conducted by highly proficient individuals during the data collection process, which greatly assisted in the analysis of the data. Twinn (1997) warns that problems may occur during translation “when no equivalent word exists in the target language and the influence of the grammatical style on the analysis” (Twinn, 1997, p. 418). Having such highly qualified interpreters and translators helped to avoid this situation in this qualitative dissertation.
**Data Analysis**

Neither gender or race can be left as unquestioned categories, but will take on different meanings in various contexts of social interaction, including the research project. In attempting to “give voice” to women from groups that are usually silent in the discourse of the academy, we need to acknowledge in our methods that we are continually negotiating around difference and must be cautious in our representations. (Dyck, Lynam, Anderson, 1995, p. 624-625)

Analysis of the data, organizing and probing data to “see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques or generate theories” (Hatch, 2002, p. 148) was ongoing throughout the dissertation study. The researcher took an analytic induction approach when examining the collected data. “Analysts using this strategy [analytic induction] will inductively code data to identify patterns and formulate potential explanations of these patterns. So, a key component of analytic induction is coding” (Brinkman, 2013, pp.47-48). Once translated into English, information from the transcripts were coded. Participant research observations studies were also coded. Interview transcripts and field research notes were reviewed by the researcher in order to reveal emerging themes, relationships, interpretations, patterns and trends discovered in the data. Analysis began early in the dissertation study and helped shape future data collection based on the findings (Hatch, 2002, p. 149). Therefore, constant comparison of data multiple revisions were made in order to validate any emerging themes, relationships, or interpretations.
The findings were analyzed with the purpose of discovering emerging categories, concepts, patterns, and themes. “The reader has to recognize that evidence comes in the form of the informant's own words and the researcher's documented observations, with judgements about the references from the analysis of collected data presented within a theoretical framework.” (Mackenzie, 1994, p. 779). The data collected emanated from the shared stories and experiences of the women interviewed. The primary aim of the analysis was to discover. This qualitative study followed Brinkman’s (2013) discovery model by allowing the concepts and categories to emerge in an uncontrolled environment; providing transparency of data collection and analysis procedures, and careful consideration of risk factors that could affect the research or the participants. For this reason, I strove for “high validity and reliability when transcribing, coding, and analyzing the materials” (Brinkman, 2013, p.80). Accurate representation of the experiences and perspectives of the participants was of the highest priority during this cross-cultural study, especially since the data was collected in one language and analyzed in another. The researcher conducted multiple reviews of the English transcripts for the purpose of conducting a “detailed analysis of the nuances of expression and meaning of particular ideas” in order to discover related threads and ideas (Smith, Short, 2001, p. 402).

**Coding**

Weston and colleagues (2001) posited that “that a collaborative approach influences just about everything in the research process: how data is collected, how the coding system is developed, applied, and verified, and ultimately how understanding is
constructed” (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlphine, Wiseman, and Beauchamp, 2001, p.383). Although some aspects of the data collection were collaborative, coding, analysis and interpretation of the statements were performed solely by the researcher. Coding occurred over a period of ten months. The analyst coded directly from the English transcripts in an effort to remain close to the data (Smith, Short, 2001). The coding process included reviewing interview transcripts multiple times, noting any emerging themes and repeated words or phrases. Comments and statements of interests by the interviewees were also noted during the initial coding. A second coding was done to pair various sections of the text with corresponding themes. Finally, a deeper analysis was conducted to guide participant comments to a more theoretical understanding (Walker, 2010). During the initial coding, I checked to verify that the codes addressed the research questions. “Although we did not yet understand the data well, we wanted to determine if these codes were addressing the research questions and to assess the robustness of codes” (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlphine, Wiseman, and Beauchamp, 2001, p.387). I looked at each interview as a separate case, but also looked for patterns that emerge across interviews and the factory workers. I also read through the transcript data and noted patterns or repeated themes. Those themes then became categories as I searched for identifying words. A code list was created “to organize the data and to document the linkages within and between phenomena and experiences captured in the data” (Baumgartner, 2012, p.13). After the initial coding, I reread each of the transcripts for finer coding and to resolve any discrepancies. Transcripts were analyzed to identify and code major themes and significant meanings with the narrative
material (Twinn, 1997). Coding was incorporated into the analysis rather than preceding the analysis. I used a recursive iterative process—flipping back and forth between stages of the analysis—during development of the codes to increase understanding (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlphine, Wiseman, and Beauchamp, 2001). The result was a deeper, more comprehensive analysis of the participant statements and stories. Although time consuming, this process really helped connect the themes and patterns that emerged from the data to the research aims and questions which shaped the study.

Weston (2001) argues that context such as research perspective, collaborative team research, and preexisting conceptual frameworks may influence research methods and coding. The framing for this dissertation study did not change during the coding process. Coding was never finite and welcomed revision. Data strictly drove the coding process—no preexisting code list—and the coding process developed during review of the material (Brinkman, 2013). I kept referring back to the data until I reached a point of saturation where very few new codes materialized, and I felt that this was the best representation of my findings at the time (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlphine, Wiseman, and Beauchamp, 2001). Overall, the information deciphered using the coding processed proved to be a valuable and crucial step in strengthening the trustworthiness of the research.

**Trustworthiness**

One of the tools used during the dissertation study to validate the data was triangulation. “Triangulation requires that multiple sources of information are brought to bear on the interpretation on an indicator, thereby guarding against the interpretative bias
of the analyst.” (Kabeer, 2010, p.21). Points revealed during the interviews were compared to any notes taken from field observations (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). Feedback regarding the coding and research were solicited from dissertation committee members, colleagues and peers. Due to time constraints and geographical limitations, neither a pilot study nor member checking was conducted for this investigation. The data collected had already gone through a series of checks and balances during the translation and back translation in order to ensure accuracy of the field research, therefore member checking was not required during the analysis phase of this dissertation study.

Finally, a field research journal helped the researcher reflect even more on the study and served as another check to reveal any underlying bias. The field journal described researcher behavior, perspective, moods, actions and experiences and how they related to the experiences of others. The journal helped explore my interactions with others, assumptions, and physical presence in the setting; it also facilitated understanding of the data collection process as well as conclusions drawn from the data. Utilizing the journal helped decipher various differences in perspectives. Most importantly, keeping a field journal helped establish an audit trail for this dissertation study by including any problems that arose and any adjustments made during the investigation.

Validity During Data Collection and Analysis

The research team involved in this study included the researcher, one liaison, one interpreter, three transcribers, one translator, and one back translator. Each individual on this team worked with me at different stages of the investigation. Sunshine worked with me at the beginning of the study, helping to arrange interviews and supplying participants
for the study. Sabrina travelled with me to every research site and verbally translated during every interview. She also worked directly with Sunshine several times to help schedule the next rounds of interviews she and I would attend. Many interviews were conducted at the worksite at the request of the participants. However, to maintain the trustworthiness of the data, some interviews were also held off the worksite. Then the participant answers were compared to the on-site interview answers to see if any significant dissimilarities occurred. Fortunately, there were none. Three female students transcribed the audio files into written transcripts. Oliver performed the forward translation and Salina conducted the back translation. With the exception of the transcribers, the individuals involved were all highly qualified, and performed their duties with little to no error. Maintaining validity remained a priority when working with the liaison, interpreter, and translation team. Careful planning, preparation, and cognizance of potential problems ensured that the validity of the data was not at risk (Plumridge, Redwood, Greenfield, Akhter, Chowdhury, Khalade, Gill, 2012).

Working with an interpreter did not negatively affect the validity of the data. To reduce the dross rate\textsuperscript{10}, the semi-structured interview questions and follow-up questions primarily stayed to topics. The interpreter asked questions on the interview protocol which were non-leading and unbiased. Although only women were involved in the interaction, variances between the women could still have affected the research study. Reinharz (1992) states that women do not necessarily identify with each other and they

\textsuperscript{10} “Dross is described by Field and Morse (1985) as data which do not relate to the topic being discussed, presenting unusable ‘fillers’ in the interview” (Twinn, 1997, p. 421).
may have different types of relationships with different individuals. Efforts were made by the researcher to lessen any anxiety or fear of intimidation. Additionally, the presence of the interpreter made the interviews seamless, and she was able to quickly identify and remedy any misunderstandings regarding the questions. We both realized “that the concept of a research interview was unfamiliar to many of the women, particularly to those who were elderly and had little formal education” (Dyck, Lynam, Anderson, 1995, p. 620). Chinese women factory workers are already a marginalized population, thus not any bias or threats to the validity of the data could not be overlooked. “Vulnerable groups may also be associated with increased error, as validity and reliability may be compromised by their misunderstanding the purposes of the research, or because they have been coerced into consent, with consequent invalid responses” (Mackenzie, 1994, p. 779). Sabrina and I made certain that all the women interviewed knew that their stories and experiences were the subject of my research. There was no deception involved. Hence, no threats to the validity of the data.

The greatest risk to validity of the data occurred during transcription of the audio files into Standard Chinese. All the interviews were transcribed; however, they were not transcribed verbatim. Fortunately, the translator discovered and remedied the problem immediately by foregoing the transcripts and translating directly from the audio files. Oliver was highly qualified and had ample experience with English translation; therefore, no data was lost and the validity of the data remained intact.

Twinn (1997) argues that the complexity of translating qualitative data from Chinese to English creates some challenges such as different interpretations in translation
and encountering words that cannot be accurately translated because there is no equivalent English word and claims that using only one translator maximizes the reliability of the study. “The influence of grammatical style is another finding that effects both the validity and reliability of the data...This is particularly so with Chinese where tenses and personal pronouns are not used which adds to the complexity of making sense of the data. In addition the structure of the responses to question in Chinese contributes to this complexity, where responses are sometimes worded negatively although the respondent is not disagreeing with the question” (Twinn, 1997, p. 421). To avoid these pitfalls, it was important to employ a translator that was not only fluent in Chinese, but was also a part of the Chinese culture and understood the nuances of the language. It was also important that the translator was well-versed in the English language, so that he could incorporate these cultural nuances into the English translation. The back translation from Salina performed an additional check for accuracy of these cultural nuances. This back translation was key because local dialects vary greatly between cities. Oliver was born and currently lives in Shaoxing, which speaks a different dialect than the area where I conducted the interviews. Salina was born and raised in the research area, so she was able to detect and remedy any errors that were made translating the local dialect to English. These small changes made the statements from the participants much more powerful.

Field notes, translation materials, and other information from each interview were kept in special Microsoft Word files organized by fieldwork date and location; each interviewee was given a pseudonym (Smith, Short, 2001). All files were encrypted and
kept in a secure area in the residence of the researcher. Analysis of the field notes examined any initial speculations of emerging themes, connections and patterns discovered amongst the experiences of the participants. New ideas as well as interpretations of any meanings that transpired were also analyzed. Field notes consisting of the researcher’s thoughts recorded before, during, and after the interviews were kept in a field research journal. Chenail says, “The process of writing/recording and reading/listening can help researchers identify heretofore unclear or unrecognized thoughts, feelings, and impressions which might have led to bias in the study if unchecked” (2009, p. 18). The field journal helped me as the researcher reflect on the study and served as an additional check for any underlying bias. This was critical because of my own intercultural issues. Gunter and Randall (2003) state that when conducting participant observation, one should observe the behavior of different cultures in actual real-life situations in order to understand the context in which these behaviors take place. I observed behaviors and had many unique experiences while immersed in Chinese society. “It will also allow researchers to adopt different cultural perspectives and to learn about the thought processes of other cultures” (Corzon, 2006, p. 91). Living and working in China helped hone my perspectives regarding this dissertation by examining the local communication styles, customs and traditions. Relating them to my own traditions and style of communication taught me not to deem one better than the other. Rather, it helped me better understand my participants and the things in this world that they deem important.
**Researcher Role and Ethics**

The theoretical and thought process did not differ from the research proposal. Thorough examination of existing theories helped shape several phases of this dissertation study, including developing the research questions, structuring the initial data collection process, translation, back translation, and analysis (Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlphine, Wiseman, and Beauchamp, 2001). It was also paramount to consider how as the researcher I affected the trustworthiness of the study. According to Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003), the researcher can post the greatest threat to the validity of the data: “It is through the researcher's facilitative interaction that a context is created where respondents share rich data regarding their experiences and life world. It is the researcher that facilitates the flow of communication, who identifies cues and it is the researcher that sets respondents at ease. This also contributes to a therapeutic effect for the respondents because they are listened to” (Poggenpoel, Myburgh, 2003, p. 418). As a result, great care was taken to prepare for this field study. Once in the field, minor adjustments were made to the interview protocol to provide clarity and accommodate the participants. In addition, a field research journal was kept throughout the study to reflect on the thoughts, actions, and experiences of the researcher.

Being reflexive about one’s contributions as a researcher to the production of knowledge required substantial consideration. “In this research like this [qualitative], the findings will be ‘filtered’ through the researcher; they will be affected by that researcher’s personality, beliefs, and experiences” (Walker, 2010, p.46). Hence, I made a conscious effort to ensure that my personal values, beliefs, and biases would not
contaminate this study. I tried to remain as objective as possible by not comparing across cultures and imposing my own Western biases when collecting or analyzing the data (Jagne, Duncker, Smith, 2006). I refrained from discussing topics such as race, politics, and women’s rights with the participants or anyone involved in this investigation. Religion was only mentioned once when one participated mentioned that she was Christian and I told her that I was also Christian. Hence, nothing was discussed that would put either the participants or the researcher at risk.

Living and working in China considerably increased consciousness of my unavoidable prejudices. During the analysis of the data, I gained insight into my subjectivity and I realized that I needed to consider complex dynamics, emic values and meanings presented in the research. Kabeer says, “Given the value laden nature of the concept of women’s empowerment, there is a danger that analysts opt for those meanings which most favour their own values regarding what constitutes appropriate choices for women” (1999, p. 461). Chinese women factory workers and I are not of the same social world; therefore, I had to be cognizant of how I constructed knowledge and represented the participants. Nevertheless, I felt at ease with these women, and for the most part they felt comfortable in my presence as well.

Chapter Summary

Data collection for this dissertation was conducted from October 2014 through October 2015 using a basic interpretative qualitative approach to examine several elements of empowerment in female factory workers in the Yangtze River Delta region of China. The researcher collected data through observation research in field notes as well as through
semi-structured participant interviews conducted in Standard Chinese and the local dialect with the assistance of an interpreter. Convenience sampling was utilized to obtain participants for this study. Twenty-four Chinese women factory workers participated in the study. These women worked in the office and on the assembly lines of four factories located in the Yangtze River Delta Economic Zone in the People’s Republic of China. I used qualitative data analysis to explore employment strategies, education, entertainment, and culture with which Chinese women factory workers engage. Transcripts from interviews were translated from Standard Chinese to English, back translated and then coded along with any research observation studies. Constant comparison of data and multiple revisions were made in order to validate any emerging themes, relationships, or interpretations. Multiple checks for underlying bias were also conducted in order to maintain the validity of the data.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

By assuming that Chinese women are victims of Chinese social structures, the literature has for a long time suppressed women’s voices and denied their subjectivities. Hearing what they have to say and observing what they do is an indispensable point of departure for recasting Chinese women as subjects (Lee, 1998, p.12).

During my search for sites to conduct my research I met Alpha, a young owner of a textile factory located within the city. His factory, which he owned with his uncle and another partner, employed approximately 150 workers. He had regular dealings in Europe and often traveled to Italy every year to meet with clients. We met during an evening session of English Corner held at a popular fast food restaurant located downtown. When I told Alpha about my research regarding women factory workers in China, he questioned my reasoning for studying them, stating that factory workers were only concerned about working and making money. Months later his statement was echoed by one of my students when I was discussing my research with him. It then occurred to me that this assumption of female factory workers in China may be pervasive throughout the local community. Furthermore, few scholarly research studies have addressed this supposition regarding women factory workers in China. Ma and Jacobs brought the issue to light in their study “Poor but not Powerless” by illuminating how factory women in China took steps to plan for the future. The researchers presented their participants “as active agents in shaping their own lives” (2010, p. 817). This dissertation study adds to this category of
literature by illuminating the concept that women factory workers in China have various aspirations and are working diligently toward achieving their personal goals. Martha Nussbaum makes an important point by stating that whether or not an individual decides to pursue her goal, the ability to have goals is a basic right that all people should possess. “We respect the importance of desire and preference by building into the most basic level of the account the option to pursue the goal or not to pursue it” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 20). Whether or not the goals are achieved, having goals inspires one to improve herself in some way shape or form; therefore, having personal goals may help facilitate empowerment.

The findings from this qualitative study are arranged to align with the three specific research questions. The foremost discussion illustrates how Chinese women factory workers conceptualize self-concept, power, and agency. The subsequent discourse centers on the self-expression of these women, particularly their perspectives regarding structural opportunities such as social networks, work environments, and education. The participants also discuss success, achievement, and how they overcame obstructions to their achievement. Finally, any additional themes which emerged during the data analysis are examined.

These emergent themes served as the criteria for choosing the quotes to present in this dissertation. I chose quotes that supported, illustrated, or reinforced the themes or patterns discovered during the data analysis. I chose quotes that I felt were extremely compelling or impactful. I also tried to choose quotes to showcase multiple participants,
rather than just quoting from a selected few. This created a more accurate representation of the women who participated in the study.

**Extracting Self-Concept as Empowerment**

During my tenure living in China I met many Chinese women from various walks of life. These women did not view themselves as victims beleaguered by Chinese society. Certainly, they felt the pressure of societal demands, but they did not consider themselves to be oppressed or marginalized members of society. Chinese women laborers in particular have been pictured in previous literature as poor women who are powerless to change their fate or improve their circumstances (Wilhelm, 1994); however, the self-concept communicated by the factory workers in this study creates a striking contrast to destitute casualty of the world’s factory depicted in a plethora of studies regarding female factory workers in China.

Some women link their self-concept to their association with others, including how other people view them. Indeed, when asked to describe themselves, many participants characterized themselves in terms regarding how they interacted with others. The women usually considered themselves social on at least a minimal level; some participants labeled themselves as extroverted while others considered themselves introverted and reserved. Zhou Luying (2016), who at age 46 was one of the older participants in this study, noted that the younger generation of workers are more extroverted than her generation: “I am a bit introvert. I am not as out-going as young people,” she said. During the interview, Pan Piao Piao, a 31-year old office worker in the Dan Ta factory, sat smiling confidently on the couch in the factory showroom with her
legs crossed showing the lower half of her bare legs from under her knee-length silk skirt. She saw herself as confident, balanced with strengths and weaknesses, and a social person with a diverse circle of friends. On the other hand, Zeng Wuqi (2015), who also worked at the Dan Ta factory, seemed quite introverted while sitting in the same showroom during her interview. “I am not so out-going, actually I am a bit introverted. And I want to enjoy quiet places by myself. I do not want to be in noisy surroundings,” she said as she sat in one place on the couch with a stoic expression, keeping her hands between her panted legs. She didn’t seem nervous at all, but she was a stark contrast to Pan Piao Piao’s very extroverted demeanor.

Work hard. . . then you will become confident. If somebody can handle it, you can handle it. It will make you better and you will become confident. You will think you are an important person here and people will look at you differently. Your ability is very good (Pan Piao Piao, 2015).

This statement by Pan Piao Piao embodies the interesting notion that a woman’s self–confidence will also affect how other people view her. Therefore, if one has confidence in herself, people will look at her differently. Expansion on this concept may reveal a key facilitator of women’s empowerment and requires more evaluation in a future study.

**Self-Description as a Component of Self-Concept**

The manner in which the participants described appeared to be a delicate balance to speak highly but humbly of themselves. All three participants from the Rojia Mo factory described themselves as hopeful, positive, loyal and ambitious. Those women
with positive outlooks of themselves seemed to be ambitious and goal-oriented. Shen Yuwei who worked in management at Rojia Mo saw herself as hopeful and positive individual who is passionate and loyal to her friends and family. “[I am] Optimistic, and full of positive energy. And I have passion to my life and those who around me, including friends and relatives” (Shen Yuwei, 2015). Zhang Yu, an accountant the Rojia Mo factory, seemed proud of her strength and independence, which were the same characteristics she admired in her mother; however, she felt her spontaneity was a bit of a shortcoming. Finally, Zhou Jie who managed sales at the same location saw herself as a goal-oriented person who is diligent, enthusiastic, and passionate about her work. “I am hard-working, and enthusiastic and I am also a person of great passion at work” (Zhou Jie, 2015).

Exploring Self-Concept and Transformation and Identifying Empowerment

Self-transformation among the women in this dissertation study took place through various forms and had different catalysts, such as work environment and living apart from home. Transformation occurred in many of the participants interviewed; however, the transformations did not occur through the same process. Changes included increased confidence, maturity, and other personality changes. Some participants experienced a change due to their work environment, while others changed through what they learned. In some instances, participants did not experience any major changes within themselves or their families. For these women, self-transformation was a fluid process that was neither finite nor predetermined. These changes in could have been either subtle or life-altering. And in some cases, the women may not have even realized
the significance of the change. Moreover, some participants such as Ma Xuejiao, a textile worker from the Nai Cha factory, connects their self-transformation with changes in lifestyle. In her view, Ma Xuejiao (2016) said that her life “has changed a lot.” She did not work until after her only child was born. Therefore, Ma Xuejiao considered working as a turning point in her life. However, Chen Ping Ping from Dan Ta did not believe that the job itself had changed her. Rather, she believed that her life changed through what she learned. Thus, the employment or place of employment did not necessarily summon transformation in Chinese women factory workers.

Increased independence and maturity were key to the transformations of the women in this qualitative study. After leaving home to work, Pan Piao Piao became a very independent woman who accomplished many tasks on her own. Her friends also viewed her as a very independent woman. “My friends always say, “You don’t need a man. You can solve every problems by yourself.” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). She viewed herself as more mature and independent, which slightly elevated her role in the family. Her parents now view her as a confidant. “I think I’ve become more mature than before. Now I can do lots of things by myself and I also can handle my parents’ issues. I can comfort them easily” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). Since coming to working at the factory Pan Piao opened herself to multiple opportunities. She felt the freedom to travel and developed her own strong sense of self. She did not follow popular conventions; she had her own values. She believed that one’s quality of life was what one makes it to be. She also stated that people could become whoever they wanted to be, which signified hope and possibilities.
Whether the transformations are minor or major, the important factor in this study for identifying empowerment is that the women noticed the transformations within themselves. Chen Jie stated that she had become a better person. She stated she felt better physically since working at the Huo Guo factory. Chen Jie chose to work at the Huo Guo because the factory did not have a night shift. She claimed that being well rested helped her take better care of herself and her family. Other personal transformations for participants included becoming more social with others at the workplace. This instance of personal transformation was true for Zenq Wuqi. Even though she stated that she was very introverted, Zeng Wuqi (2015) admitted that she enjoyed working on a team: “I have changed a little in my personality. After I came here, I enjoy working as a team.” Since working at Rojia Mo, Zhang Yu believed that she also became more social and grew as a person by maturing and becoming more confident; however, Zhang Yu did not think she changed very much. Some participants saw no major changes while other changes had negative effects on the participants. For instance, Shen Jia Jia (2015) saw no major changes since she started working at Dan Ta, except having less family time and a higher pay: “I think the life is almost the same as before, except the fact that I have less time to take care of my kid, and that I get a higher salary.” Having less time to take care of her child was a negative change for Shen Jia Jia. Thus, this instance may be considered detrimental to her personal empowerment.

Self-transformation is not finite. In fact, it can also be seen as an aspiration. Some participants continued to work toward transforming their lives. Zhang Yu (2015) took steps towards making her life better because she felt that she could not enjoy her life if it
remained stagnant with no improvement: “Because in my view, if I do not improve myself, there will be no joy in my life.” Some participants, like Chen Ping Ping, continued to strive for a higher level of independence. “I work hard to make myself a bit more independent than I was” (Chen Ping Ping, 2015). Other factory workers, like Deng Ci Ai, devised broader goals such as being able to provide for her family. “I do not know whether I could or not, but I hope that I will be able to [provide for my family]” (Deng Ci Ai, 2016). The women in this dissertation study saw their transformation as growth. This growth took place through various forms and processes. Increased confidence, maturity, and other personality changes were some of the transformations the participants experienced. These changes can be either subtle or life-altering. In some instances, participants did not experience any major changes within themselves or their families; and in some cases, the individual may not even realize the significance of the change. Finally, the employment or place of employment does not necessarily summon transformation in an individual. Transformation also occurred through what the women have learned. The concept of transformation via education will be examined further later in this chapter.

Aspirations and Goals

A common misconception about factory workers is reflected by Alpha, owner of Gan Bei Textile Manufacturing in Northeastern Zhejiang province. On the other hand, Zhou Luying (2016), study participant, had a different value in mind. “The happiness and well-being of my family. Money is not the most important one,” as did Shen Yuwei (2015) who said, “I hope that my family members will be happy and my parents will be
healthy, and that I will have more free time to take care of my parents.” Having aspirations is a key component to facilitating women’s empowerment. When a woman has aspirations, she has hope for herself and for others close to her. The aspirations of the women in this research study centered on work and family, while greater wealth was only a secondary goal for most participants. Zhou Luying was more economically well off than she was previously. However, making money was not her priority; rather the health and happiness of her family. Similarly, what Shen Yuwei wanted most in life had nothing to do with economic gains; rather, what she desired most in life was for her family to be healthy and happy, and more time to care for her aging parents. This notion of “family first” is reminiscent of the filial duty expected of Chinese children. Shen Jia Jia, like most working women, wished she had more time to spend with her son. Shen Lili, an employee at the Nai Cha factory, also had goal which was also family-centered; in her case, it was to help her son with his business. Zenq Wuqi was currently happy with her life, but still hoped that her quality of life would improve. Her current hope was that her husband’s business would improve. Her aspiration did not necessarily mean that his business was struggling, just that it would get better. Other participants, like Chen Jie, had specific entrepreneurial plans. Chen Jie aimed to become her own boss and open up a shop or start her own business. She trusted that if she opened her own business, then she would have more time for herself. This is a very individualistic goal, which may not seem to fit the stereotypical, traditional view of Chinese women.

The notions of hope and improvement thread throughout the answers of all the participant. Their goals consisted of both conventional and personal aims. Chen Ping
Ping had two main goals: the first was the conventional Chinese female norm of getting married; her second goal was to improve her work which she needed to do to guarantee a good future. She said, “For the people of my age, one of the most important goals is to get married. And I also want to get improved in my work. If I do not improve myself, the life in future will be difficult for me” (Chen Ping Ping, 2015). Some participants, like Shen Yuwei, set individual goals in order to improve the quality of their families. Her personal goal was individual but the reason behind it was for collective benefit. Zhou Luying and her family already achieved one goal of owning a car, so her next collective goal was to buy a house. Zhou Jie was planning for her future and for the future of her parents. She wanted to buy a car and a house not just for herself, but for her parents. In addition, she wished to give them additional financial support and perceived these actions as taking good care of them. She also intended to visit her grandparents, but did not explicitly state that taking care of her grandparents was her responsibility; rather they were the responsibility of her parents. “I am planning to buy a car and a house, and they give us some money to buy the car and house. We will take good care of them. What’s more, my grandparents are very old, so I will go back to my parents’ home often to see them” (Zhou Jie, 2015).

Not all goals are collective. For many participants, particularly for the women that worked in an administrative or office position, their goals are individually based and centered on obtaining a higher position at work. Zhou Jie was working towards getting promoted in the company. She used education (i.e., getting more training and certification) to obtain her goal. Chen Siyu wanted more than what she currently had and
was working toward improving her life by saving money and trying to obtain higher positions in the company. In contrast, the majority of the unskilled labors interviewed did not mention elevation in the company as a personal goal. This difference in aspirations between the two types of factory women I interviewed supports the claim Mary Connerley and Paul Pederson noted in their research of cultural frameworks that “... individuals within an organization often view their organization differently. These varying views often align themselves with individuals’ levels within the company hierarchy. This results in leaders often having different views about their corporate culture compared to those in the lower levels in the organization” (2005, p.40). However, there are exceptions. Fifteen years ago, Shen Yuwei began working at the Rojia Mo steel factory as a laborer on the production floor. Throughout the years she worked her way upwards in the company and at the time of this study was the assistant general manager with a large staff, mostly men, under her. Ma Xuejiao was the only worker to fulfill Alpha’s and the common perception that factory workers were primarily concerned with working and making money. Her primary goal was to earn as much money as possible, and she never considered obtaining a higher position within the company. She said, “All I want to do is working hard, and to earn as much money as possible. As for the promotion at work, I haven’t ever thought of it” (Ma Xuejiao, 2016). Her goal was simple, but no less important. The fact that Ma Xuejiao had a goal demonstrates her personal empowerment.

The participants signified hope through possessing the capability to achieve aspirations and goals. Having aspirations and goals not only affects the women who have
these goals, but may also affect the people close to the women. It also has the potential to increase a woman’s happiness. Every woman interviewed saw herself being happier in the near future and expressed a desire to improve themselves someway. “I want to improve my ability to a new level” (Zeng Wuqi, 2015). Greater wealth was not the primary goal for most participants; instead, the aspirations of the women in this research study centered on work and family. The aspirations varied and geared toward both individual and collective and consisted of both conventional and personal aims.

**Conceptualize Strength Among Ourselves**

“Self-confidence, self-improvement as well as the ways she deal with things” [makes a woman strong] (Zhang Yu, 2015).

The concept of strength discovered in this qualitative study consists of interwoven components including, self-confidence and self-improvement. When asked to define what they understood makes a woman strong, the participants defined strength in terms of a woman’s self-improvement, confidence in herself, and her demeanor when managing various situations. For instance, Zhou Jie (2015) equated strength with diligence and discipline, and her statement “Never put off the things to tomorrow” showed that she refused to procrastinate. Interestingly, the factory women in this research study never mentioned physical prowess; instead, they categorized strength in terms of personal character and goal orientation. Another finding uncovered during this investigation is that power does not necessarily have to be sought only from within; it can be sought from an external source, such as a partner. In times of great stress, Pan Piao Piao experienced loneliness, a lack of support. “In fact, I sometimes I feel I have my weakness. Um,
sometimes if the work has lots of pressure. I feel so lonely. Feel nobody can help me like that. Sometimes I cry. You want somebody help you and give you support, but you can’t find nobody and it’s really difficult” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). Though she previously described herself as very independent, Pan Piao Piao said that sometimes she felt too weak to manage the situation alone, and she desired someone (i.e., a husband) to give her strength and support. Instead of seeking greater strength, she wanted to find someone to support her. I found it interesting that she did not require someone to be strong for her, but she instead she sought someone to support her so they can be strong together.

For a number of the workers strength was an aspiration not yet achieved. While several participants did not consider themselves strong, some of them aspired to be strong. Shen Yuwei was content with her life because her family was happy and her child was doing well academically; however, she realized that even in her current position she still faced competition and thought educating herself would help her stay ahead of the competition. “There are many people who work harder than me and who are more excellent than me, and I want to be as good as them” (Shen Yuwei, 2015). Shen Jia Jia did not consider herself strong, but wants to be a little stronger. Though, just like the other women, she intended to limit her strength. She foresaw gaining power through learning—by learning more skills, she would be stronger.

Some participants did not want to be strong, or expressed the need to limit their power. Their statements revealed that limits of strength were not universal; in fact, they could be guided by social convention and tradition. Chen Ping Ping did not feel the need to be strong. However, she retained the possibility to be more powerful in the future.
Moreover, the experience of one participant demonstrated how the level of one’s strength may affect how others viewed that person. Pan Piao Piao insisted that she should not be too strong. She was definitely proud of her independence; however, she refused to believe she was strong. In her eyes, independence did not equate strength. She learned from previous experience that if she presented herself as too powerful, it intimidated others: “I think I shouldn’t show me too powerful to others. It is a little like you are too stronger to others. You make the other person feel bad like. I think I really made mistake about it for some other persons.” On the other hand, Zhou Jie was confident that society wants her to be strong. Her statement opposes Pan Piao Piao who argued that too much strength unsettled others. Thus, strength is a challenging concept that requires delicate balance in Chinese women since societal perceptions on strong women can be conflicting.

**Roles and Responsibilities Comprising Self-Concept**

For most participants, their role within the family did not significantly change, verifying that empowerment is not synonymous with change in status. However, several participants did take on more responsibilities and gained a voice to speak and exchange opinions with authority figures such as parents. Residence and living conditions have also shown to significantly affect the role one retains within the family. For Chen Ping Ping declared that her circumstances did not change since working at the family, especially since she was single and still living at home. Henceforward, she maintained the typical status as a daughter in a customary Chinese family. While working at the factory, Pan Piao Piao transitioned from codependence to independence. She made her
own decisions and no longer sought input from her father. Though she would still contact him when she had a problem because hearing his voice was comforting. After separating from her parents, Zhou Jie (2015) assumed more responsibilities such as cooking and doing housework: “After I worked here [at Rojia Mo], I did not do such kind of things as cooking. But now I live alone, I have to do some housework and sometimes to some cooking.” Her role in the family has elevated to a point where now she could freely exchange opinions with her family and be a confidant. She said, “When we are together, I will exchange my opinions with them.” Murphy-Graham states, “For women to become empowered in their intimate relationships, they must develop the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it” (2010, p.321). Even though Zhou Jie had already taken on more responsibility, her change in familial status did not solely materialize from her personal effort. Her parents’ acceptance of her new role validates that other people have the ability to elevate a person’s status.

Familial roles may not change due to empowerment, but an empowered woman may take on different responsibilities within the family. Murphy-Graham (2010) says, “For many women, their marriage or domestic partnership is the most difficult place for them to negotiate gender responsibilities” (p.321). Zhou Luying accepted and fulfilled what she saw as doing the typical things of Chinese women, such as doing the housework and cooking. Most of the household duties of the participants included childcare, general housework, cooking, earning money and contributing economically to the family’s living expenses. Shen Jia Jia worked while still maintaining traditional role of wife and mother.
Shen Yuwei performed multiple roles at home: wife, mother, and daughter. Zhang Yu’s responsibilities include financial support of her family as well as caring for her child. Zenq Wuqi and her husband currently divided household responsibilities, including caring for their child, between them.

“I just gave birth to my child. Generally, in China kids are very important, so I have to take care of my child and that is why I do not have much time to do some reading,” said Zhang Yu (2015) who spends most of her energy caring for her child. Chen Jie said when she was living at home and attending school, she had no other responsibilities but studying and depended heavily on the dominant figures in the household to do virtually everything for her. For Zhou Jie, that dependence on her parents has continued into adulthood. At home Pan Piao (2015) was very dependent on her parents and did not have many responsibilities: “My parents protect me well. Yeah. I didn’t do anything. Lots of things my parents did.” After she left home and began working at the factory, Pan Piao Piao confessed that benefitted from the experience of learning to be independent. She admitted, “But after I left home, I learned to do everything by myself. I think it’s good for me.” Therefore, supplementary investigations should be conducted to thoroughly examine how the amount of household responsibilities affects the agency in Chinese women factory workers, particularly the ones who did not live at the worksite.

**Examining the Effect of Influential People and Role Models on Self-Concept**

Influential persons named during the interviews included parental figures such as mothers, fathers, and grandparents. Findings from this study corroborated the existing
literature that most dominate role in the Chinese family household remained fluid and could be transferred if circumstances dictated. Huang Qiudong, a Christian, was the only worker who named God as the most influential person in her life. Defying many assumptions and stereotypes, the most influential person in the household of these women factory workers was not always the dominant male figure, though some households though still maintained this tradition. Yao Cong Cong from the Huo Guo factory was married and had a child but her father wielded the greatest influence over her family. Shen Lili from the Nai Cha factory identified her adult son as the greatest influence in her household. Conversely, several participants mentioned female family members as the most influential individuals in their lives. Zhang Yu (2015) proclaimed that her mother had the greatest impact on her life. She valued her mother’s strong will and independence and regarded her mother as an excellent role model for herself: “She is strong in mind as well as independent, and that is why I want to learn from her.” Shen Yuwei chose her maternal grandmother, the matriarch of the household, as the individual who impacted her the most.

My maternal grandmother had the biggest influence on me. In my childhood, when I broke a bowl, my mother was so bad-tempered that she would yell at me or even beat me. When Grandma saw that kind of things, she would tell Mother “sui sui ping an”, the broken bowl meant to be peaceful all year round (in Chinese “碎” (sui) which means broken has the same pronunciation as “岁月” (sui) which means “a year”). Later when I grew up, I knew that it is no using scolding or
beating kids, since the bowl is broken, for doing that will only terrify kids. That is why I regard Grandma as a wise a forgiving person (Shen Yuwei, 2015).

The informal education from her grandmother taught Shen Yuwei to be forgiving toward children, a philosophy Shen Yuwei incorporated into the rearing of her own child.

Interestingly, elder sisters also held the most significant influence in some households. Her sister lived independently from her parents and Zhou Jie view her sister as a model for her own conduct and behavior. Interestingly, Zhou Jie stated that her father and elder sister made the most decisions for the family, not her mother and father. She did not mention that the mother is not present in the household. However, she always said “parents,” it may be inferred that the mother was still present in the household but did not make any major decisions.

When faced with a difficult, Shen Lili would consult her husband and her mother. Multiple participants named their husbands as the most influential persons in their lives. In fact, many of the unskilled labor workers interviewed said that their husbands were the most influential person in their family. Shen Jia Jia (2015) perceived her husband as an equal partner in their relationship and her life: “He is the other half of me in my life.” Nevertheless, her husband still made the most decisions in the family. Bao Ziqian who worked at the Nai Cha factory and lived in a rural section of the area also agreed that her husband holds the greatest influence in her household. Gender influences shifted after marriage for Zenq Wuqi. Unlike Pan Piao Piao whose father was the greatest influence, this participant’s greatest influence at home was her mother. After she is married, that influence has shifted to her husband.
Even though Hu Qian claimed that her husband was the most influential person in the family, she disclosed that she made any difficult decisions independently before consulting anyone else in her family. Chen Jie (2016) proudly stated, “Generally, I make the decisions.” Shao Yufen also proclaimed that she had the most influence in her family. This significant discovery indicates that these “marginalized” women do maintain leadership roles within their family which is in sharp contrast to transdisciplinary feminist literature on women workers in global factories which contend that women workers worldwide are subject to collusion the patriarchal family (Lee, 1998). Notwithstanding, no participants felt that they possessed the capability to impact their community. When asked about her influence in the local community, Gu Yumeng (2016), a textile worker at the Nai Cha factory replied, “I am just an ordinary person in it and so I do not have any influence on it.” All the women in this investigation felt that their status was not high enough to make a difference within their area. This belief that they lacked the capability to influence their surroundings may actually detract from their agency and empowerment. As a result, additional research is required to discover how women factory workers can overcome this negative perception they have of themselves regarding their societal status.

**Increasing Agency Through Decision Making**

Do Chinese women factory workers display more individualism or collectivism in their choices? Understanding these social frameworks in which they prioritize their needs, expectations and interests (Connerly, Pedersen, 2005) is essential to understanding agency, empowerment and achievement within this community. The ability to for a
woman to make decisions for herself is a critical component of women’s empowerment. Hence, this study attempted to demonstrate that empowerment was not just about being able to make choices; it also included the conditions of choices, their content and consequences. Only Chen Jie explicitly stated that she made critical decisions independently. For the other participants in this dissertation study, circumstances usually determined whether decisions were made individually or collectively. Whether the problem was solved individually or collectively depended on the severity of the problem. More difficult problems were solved collectively while smaller problems were solved individually. Chen Siyu (2016), a production worker at the Huo Guo factory, said “I will solve the small ones by myself. When it comes to big problems, I will ask my family for advice.” Zhou Jie explained that she and her boyfriend consulted her parents for advice when they wanted to buy a house. When Shen Jia Jia made the choice to work at the factory, she also made the decision together with her family. Finally, even though Pan Piao Piao made the decision to work at the factory alone, she still needed additional support from the dominant male in the household (i.e., her father) to help ease the transition.

In some cases, the father in the household would make the primary decisions for situations that affected the family; however, for individual circumstances the dominant male would usually give his advice but the female participant made the final decisions regarding her personal affairs. Chen Ping Ping (2015) viewed individualistic choices as a disadvantage at times. She said, “I tend to get myself into a dead end. I will be so occupied by my own opinion that I will not listen to other people. I know it is not so
good.” In other words, Chen Ping Ping felt her insistence to make individual decisions detracted her agency. Chen Ping Ping expressed that it was beneficial that her father made the most decisions for the family and she felt comfortable consulting him for advice regarding her personal affairs. However, external circumstances, such as health issues superseded traditional decision making protocol in the family. For instance, when Shen Yuwei’s father was healthy, he made most of the decisions in the household. However, after her father fell ill, most decisions were made collectively.

Interestingly, even though some women perceived their families to be traditionally Chinese households, they remained flexible and would seamlessly adapt roles outside tradition if necessary. Zenq Wuqi a 34-year-old administrative worker at Dan Ta viewed herself and her husband as a typical Chinese family. She explained, “Our family is a typical Chinese family, so usually I am in charge of small things and my husband deals with large things. And actually for most of the things, we make decisions together” (Zeng Wuqi, 2015). In her eyes, within the traditional Chinese family structure the dominant male (in this case, her husband) made the significant decisions and she handled all minor decisions. Despite this perception, she admitted that she and her husband made most decisions together, which conflicted the general perception of a typical Chinese family.

The ability to make choices, the conditions of choices, their content and consequences are key and can significantly affect the life of an individual and the livelihood of others around her. Although some of the women in this study would make all decisions independently, many of the respondents chose to make strategic-life
decisions collectively with their family members. Minor decisions or decisions regarding personal affairs were usually handled solely by the individual. In many cases, the father would make the decisions that affected the entire household, but would only counsel his daughter in regards to her individual decisions. This preliminary research to examine how the choices of women factory workers and the consequences of their choices and alternatives affects the agency in these women begs for additional studies and a more thorough analysis of this phenomenon.

**Conceptualizing Agency in Terms of Economic Resources**

Attaining economic resources can augment agency in women and their ability to make choices. Numerous social science scholars (Kabeer, 1999) state that changes in women’s resources will translate into changes in their choices. Economic resources can be contributed in various forms, including financial contributions or gifts given to the family, and this capability to have economic resources can cultivate independence or codependence in women. Economic stability is the primary aspiration for increased economic resources, rather than just personal gains. All the same, responsibility for the financial welfare of the household may or may not lay with a specific person and will vary within each family structure.

When asked whether they had the capability to provide for themselves and their families, results varied among the workers. Gu Yemeng did not feel economically secure, and her goal was to increase her economic resources. Ye Xin wanted to live a better life and was saving money in order to improve her circumstances in the future. Zhou Luying explained that it was typical for people in their forties to have some sort of
savings for the future. Zhang Yu expressed that she felt a sense of financial security working in her current position. Pan Piao Piao hoped to earn more money, but she believed her salary was adequate enough to support a family. Deng Ci Ai was not sure if she earned enough money to provide her and her family’s future, but she hoped someday she would be able to provide that economic stability. Shen Jia Jia (2015) expressed that, as a mother, her main concern of was making sure that her son was happy. “It is too early to provide for future for my son, so I do not even think of it. He is so young that all that I do is to make him happy, to provide him will a happy life, so I do not give him too much pressure.” In other words, stability and happiness superseded any mere desire for personal gains.

Results from this show indicate the capability to have economic resources can cultivate independence or codependence. Kabeer says, “It is certainly the case that in contexts where the separation of resources within the family, and indeed, some degree of separation within the family, has cultural sanction, women may view greater autonomy as a desirable goal for themselves.” (1999, p. 25). Chen Ping Ping (2015) was in a codependent relationship between the participant and her parents. She was dependent on her parents for food, etc. and she also purchased items for the household: “We live together, and I will give them living expenses, and I will also buy them things. Since we live together, I am not economically independent; I depend on them for food and other things.” On the other hand, some participants stated they did not feel obligated to contribute to their family expenses. Zhou Luying declared it was not her responsibility to provide economically for her family. She argued that responsibility belonged to her
husband and her son-in-law, and any money she and her daughter made were used for their own purposes. She said, “It is my husband who is able to provide for my family. What my daughter and I do is to provide for ourselves (Zhou Luying, 2016). Her coworkers Chen Jie and Ye Xin, also did not consider themselves as economically responsible to provide for their families and stated that their husbands were responsible to fulfill that duty.

Finally, there remains a general perception that all migrant factory workers send remittances home to support their families in other provinces. While many workers continue to follow this practice, other workers have families who are self-supporting; therefore they do not send any money home. Pan Piao Piao claimed her parents were self-supporting; however, she still kept in mind supporting her parents in the future when they become elderly. “They take themselves well, so maybe on the holiday—on the Chinese New Year—I just buy some gifts for them. Maybe when they are old I can give them money, but now they don’t need me” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). Zhou Jie also did not financially support her family, but only provided gifts and other occasional necessities: “I will also buy them fruits, presents, clothes and shoes, and during spring festivals, I will give them gift money.” Conversely, Zeng Wuqi devoted her entire salary to support her family.

The ability to obtain and increase economic resources can develop agency in women and even guide the choices they make for themselves and their families. These resources may provide opportunities for greater independence or increased codependence in women. Moreover, responsibility for the financial welfare varies within each
household. Many of the women interviewed during this study desire economic stability rather than just economic gains. They plan for their own future and the future and other family members.

Expressing Perception of Work Structure and Opportunities Within That Environment

Although the evolution of technology increased the methods of searching for jobs at factories—Shen Jia Jia applied online for her current position—word of mouth continued to be a key approach to locate job opportunities for all the women involved in this research study. Pan Piao Piao found her job via recommendation from her friend who happened to be a client of the Dan Ta Corporation. Her hometown was more agricultural, and she wanted to enjoy greater opportunities available only in the city. Other participants were introduced to their jobs through family members, like Zhang Yu who was introduced to Rojia Mo by her uncle, and Zhou Jie joined the same factory through a recommendation from her sister.

This group of second generation of female factory workers considered multiple factors when searching a factory position. Motivations for finding work at the factories extended beyond the simple goal of making money, although several participants did change jobs in order to make more money (which is a normal practice worldwide). Results of this study indicate that stability and the fit to one’s personal needs or interests were primary motivations of job hunt strategy. Zhou Jie chose to work at Rojia Mo because she felt the position had potential for her to grow. Cheng Ping Ping mentioned that she worked at several companies after she graduated from college; finally, she chose
to work at the Dan Ta because the job provided the stability she preferred. Many of the participants found their jobs independently and chose their jobs because they desired stability and the jobs seemed to be a good match. Within this research investigation, the reasons for choosing a particular factory varied among the women. Years ago Shen Yuwei worked at her family’s warehouse. However, she wanted to learn more about the business, so she made an independent decision to take a job at the Rojia Mo steel factory. Chen Jie chose her current position at Huo Guo because of its close proximity to her home, and the schedule suited her since she could work dayshift instead of nights. Shen Jia Jia wanted a job that challenged her and offered a larger salary. She also thought her current job in the Marketing department would improve her skills as well as her economic resources: “The last job was too comfortable for me. I only have to work for a very short period, and there was no pressure. What is more, the salary is very low.” When Zeng Wuqi was searching her job after her college graduation, she had a clear idea of the job that she wanted and made sure that it related to her major. She had a goal and made sure to obtain it, although she admitted that it took some time to adjust to the work and life in the city.

Analyzing the Structural Support of Social Networks

All the participants had established some sort of social network within their department. Every participant had friends both at work and outside work. Social networks extended within and outside the work environment, regardless of one’s status level. Social networks usually included childhood friends or classmates and workmates, even though the two circles might never intermingle. Many participants who were native
to the area had mostly friends who were also local. Chen Jie (2016) had a support network of friends solely consisting of factory workers: “Some in this factory and many more in other factories.” Zeng Wuqi kept a small group of friends of college classmates and close friends from her hometown. Workers who were not native to the area tended to have more diverse social networks. Zhang Yu considered herself very social and boasted a diverse group of friends from other provinces in China whom she met while she was in college. During the interviews I discovered that the more outgoing participants seemed to have more diverse social circles. Pan Piao Piao had the most diverse circle of friends, varying in gender and professions. Some close friends she had known since childhood; others she met in while taking classes at a local English training school:

I have lots of friends in different state in my life I have different people. My classmates from middle school and university classmates I always have some very close friends now. We still keep in touch now. But after work I also, you know I learned in [English Training School], I make lots of friends there. Some teachers, some doctors, some businessmen. (Pan Piao Piao, 2015)

The women participated in both physical and non-physical activities with their friends. Shen Jia Jia frequently exercised and travelled with her friends. Shen Yuwei would partake in various social and physical activities with her friends such as chatting, drinking tea, hiking, and body-building exercises. All the women in this field study said they conversed frequently using popular social media tools and applications. Social media networks and internet chatting tools like WeChat, QQ, etc. were used for both work and personal purposes. Zhang Yu used the internet often for both work and personal
purposes, including searching for advice on parenting. Many participants used the internet to talk to their friends, play games, and watch television and movies online. The office workers in this investigation used the internet for both personal and work purposes while the production workers used the internet primarily for personal purposes.

Multilingualism seemed to be a common occurrence at every work site visited. Many of the workers were multilingual. They could speak Standard Chinese as well as their local dialect\(^\text{11}\). This ability is typical of many Chinese, but not everyone possessed this skill. Some workers like Hu Qian, an unskilled laborer at the Nai Cha textile factory, only spoke the local dialect, rather than standard Standard Chinese. Her coworker Shen Lili could speak three languages. Zhou Luying said that she used her local dialect to chat with workmates who originated from nearby cities since they shared the same language; however, she would switch to standard Standard Chinese to speak to coworkers who were not from the local area. Similarly, Shen Jia Jia would sometimes use the local dialect, but not all her coworkers were natives so she would switch to Standard Chinese.

No matter if they worked in the office or on the assembly line, the women discussed a myriad of topics including husbands, children, popular television shows, family, personal events, etc.; however, the women would also discuss personal problems that they were experiencing and sought solace and support from their close friends and workmates. All the women interviewed showed a level of concern for each other. For Zenq Wuqi, the concern and support from her coworkers saved her life:

\(^{11}\) Local dialects vary from city to city in China. Although some dialects are closer to others, there are some dialects that can only be understood by people from that same region.
Shortly after I worked here, I suffered appendicitis. Because I was new here, and because I did not know how to take good care of myself, otherwise, I would have been aware of the seriousness of this illness before it became severe. My colleagues sent me to hospital two days after my stomach ached. It is so severe that the doctor said that if I had been there half a day later, I would have died. Actually thanks to the illness, I met my husband. The bad thing is that it had left a sequela\textsuperscript{12} for several years. Every time when I think of this, I am a bit regretful. I regret my being unable to take care of myself. (Zeng Wuqi, 2015)

In almost all scenarios involving women factory workers in China, work departments maintained a type of familial hierarchy. Female leaders were usually seen as an elder sister who could guide the other members of the team. In Piao Piao’s department, the workers expressed mutual respect for one another. The workers acted like a family and she regarded herself as the matriarch. “The culture is good. We are like a team. I have three assistants. I treat them very well. I think they are like my little sisters and little brother. I teach them how to work and I teach them everything about it. Because your team, you treat them better they will respect you. Every people like to get along with each other it is better” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). She saw herself as a role model for her team and she took that role very seriously.

\textsuperscript{12} A sequela can be an infection or another abnormality which resulted from a previous medical procedure or pre-existing disease.
Several of the participants stated they had a role model at work. Having a role model at work seemed to increase aspirations for the women. Generally, the respondents perceived their female role models as diligent, strong, and economically successful. Research shows that in many Asian countries, including China, “men tend to have a higher social status and few women hold positions of authority” (Connerly, Pederson, 2005, p. 46). In all cases during this investigation, the role model was a woman in some type of management position who the women admired for her hard work, discipline and achievement. Zeng Wuqi admired one women at her workplace for her economic success and hard work. Shen Yuwei admired a woman who was in senior management at Rojia Mo. Shen Yuwei and the female executive were the same age, and Shen Yuwei said she respected this woman for her consistent hard work even though this woman was already in a top executive. Zhang Yu admired a female manager who was a former mentor and helped Zhang Yu during a difficult time; she also held great esteem for the manager’s diligence and perseverance. Zhou Jie respected the strength and diligence of her role model at work, the same qualities that she revered in her elder sister, whom she perceived as a personal role model. Role models were not limited to women in leadership roles. One participant also admire that the younger employees have a passion for life. Having a role model or mentor is key to women’s empowerment as a means to develop a woman’s aspirations.

**Qualifying Job Satisfaction and Role Within the World’s Factory**

Most participants reported some sort of satisfaction with their work and considered their work valuable: 63% of the participants expressed satisfaction, while 21% were
dissatisfied. The remaining 17% had no answer. This feeling signifies a great facilitator of empowerment for these women. Her work gave Zhang Yu a sense of fulfillment and achievement. Chen Ping Ping considered her work a benefit and foresaw multiple opportunities and possibilities at Dan Ta. Zhou Jie (2015) also proclaimed she was happy about her work. She considered her work important because her colleagues depended on her a great deal: “If I am away from the office, my colleagues will look for me by making phone calls.” Zeng Wuqi took pride in her work and her professional accomplishments. Zhou Jie (2015) demonstrated global awareness and understood her job occupied a key position in the global market: “Our company was now on the way to the integration of the global community. And since I am in charge of the international trade, I think I will do better in this field in the next few years.” It was important to note that the most participants that saw value in their job were office workers in the factory. This revelation may have had an impact which requires further exploration.
Goa Sisi embodied the typically assumed profile of Chinese factory women. She was an unskilled textile employee who worked but has no specific goals. Her husband was most influential person in her household and all decisions not made solely by him were made collectively. She was content with her job, but did not like it. Similar to Gao Sisi, Hu Qian did not like her job on the workshop floor, but she kept it because she felt obligated to earn money for her family. Even though she wanted to succeed in the company, she thought she was not a valuable worker for the factory. Shen Xiaoyan (2016), one of the workers interviewed off-site, echoed a similar sentiment when she said, “I am just an ordinary worker.” This concept of their status in the company may be a considered detrimental to their empowerment if it prevents these women from achieving their goals of promoting themselves within the company.

Adjusting to their new position and responsibilities was prevalent among the participant answers as the least satisfying time in their employment at the factory. Zhang Yu (2015) said, “When I came to work here, I found that the job was so difficult that I want to quit. Finally, I convinced myself to keep working here.” Chen Jie (2016) stated she also had immense difficulty first adjusting to her job in the beginning, but ultimately made the decision to persevere: “The time when I was first worked here. It seems to be too difficult for me to continue working here, but finally I convinced of myself to carry on.” In the same way, when Zhang Yu first started her job, she was not confident; however, she had faith in her skills and continued working. Time and self-confidence helped the women adjust and even thrive within their work environment. When she first
started working at the factory nine years ago, Pan Piao Piao was overwhelmed with the numerous responsibilities the job required. Over time she acclimated to the position and learned to make more decisions regarding managing clients and strengthening business relations with them. Shen Jia Jia traversed her difficult adjustment to the work environment by educating herself, learning more, and communicating with her colleagues. Zeng Wuqi also had trouble adjusting to her new position, but eventually gained more knowledge about the position and responsibilities involved.

**Exploring Adaptation to Criticism at Work**

“In my opinion, these are suggestions for improvement instead of criticisms” (Chen Ping Ping, 2015).

The majority of participants perceived criticism at work as a chance for improvement. Chen Ping Ping prefers to see them as criticisms as suggestions for improvement; therefore, she was more receptive to the criticism. In fact, her answer made me evaluate this interview question during the data collection process. The word criticism has a negative connotation and every previous participant had answered no to this question up to this point. Once I changed the wording to “suggestions for improvement,” almost every participant afterward answered positively to this question. Pan Piao Piao said she would feel bad and sometimes cried when criticized, but eventually would use the critical statements to improve her performance. Zeng Wuqi (2015), like Pan Piao Piao, accepted criticism as an opportunity for improvement. She said, “When I failed to do the job right, the boss will criticize me. In my opinion, criticism will make me aware of the mistakes I made, and to me it is a way of improving
my job.” Although at first Shen Yuwei would not feel positive about the criticism she received, she also used it as a tool for self-improvement.

When faced with criticism, Zhang Yu would evaluate the reproach. If she disagreed, she would stand firm and argue her point, but if she believed the other party was correct then she would accept the critical advice. Every woman interviewed never viewed criticism as an assault on their character; rather they considered criticism as a chance to better themselves. In addition, if they did not agree with the criticism, they did not hesitate to voice their opinion. Like Zhang Yu, when faced with criticism Zhou Jie would evaluated the validity of the argument, she would then accept the suggestions for improvement if she agreed with them. These actions are key evidence to the agency that factory women workers in China possess. They are not all brutalized by patriarchal society and factory bosses, but are strong women who will take a stand and defend their opinions when they deem it necessary.

When dealing with a problem or difficult decision at work, most of the participants asked a third-party for assistance or resolution. “I think I learn from others. And I ask the person, ask them how to correct it” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). When she had a disagreement with someone at work, Zeng Wuqi would attempt to handle the situation independently and try to come to an agreement with the other party. However, if no agreement could be reached, she invited a third party to finally gain resolution. She explained, “Usually we will first state our opinions, and why. Sometimes, during the communication, the agreement will be reached. And if the two people find it difficult to convince each other, there will be a third person coming up with a solution” (Zeng Wuqi,
Shen Jia Jia asserted that conflicts with friends at work could get emotional, but would eventually get resolved and the friendship remained intact. When Yao Cong Cong had a problem at work she stated she resolved it immediately by discussing the problem with her colleagues to seek a resolution. Finally, when faced with a difficult decision, Zhou Jie attested that she would reach a decision independently, then she would ask a superior for advice.

When Shen Yuwei (2015) disagreed with an action or policy at work, she would voice her opinion and also forwarded her suggestions to upper management. Even though she was confident to takes these steps, she said she was “not sophisticated enough to handle her jobs” because she stood her ground and her opinions remained resolute:

At first I was in charge of technical and production department, and now I am in charge of purchasing. Since I am a manager, sometimes, I will disapprove something that is unreasonable. And sometimes I will put forward my suggestions to my leaders. In a word, I am not sophisticated enough to handle my job, for I tend to stick to my opinions (Shen Yuwei, 2015).

Even though she perceived her defiance as a detriment, Shen Yuwei actually invoked agency by maintaining her ground on the issue and voicing her opinion to her superiors. At the Rojia Mo steel factory where Shen Yuwei works, there were very few women in management positions. Moreover, I have learned from experience that the workplace culture in China does not appreciate subordinates questioning any decision made from the by their superiors. Most subordinates would grumble with their co-workers but comply
with the decision. Therefore, for Shen Yuwei to voice her disagreement with upper management is a significant example of the type of agency these women exhibit.

**Examining the Application and Value of Education**

Figure 3 reveals that not all female factory workers have rudimentary educations. In truth, women with various education levels participate in factory work. For instance, Shen Lili, who dropped out after junior high school to start working, learned to play the guitar and the harmonica and could speak three different languages.

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*Table 2. Participant education levels and participation in job training or self-learning*
However, analysis of the collected data does indicate that the women with more advanced education were less likely to work on the production floor. Unlike the office workers who were all college educated, most of the production workers ended their formal schooling by junior high school. Each of the participants interviewed acknowledged that education had the power to impact her life somehow. They believed that education had a direct correlation with improvement. Some women associated education with a change in perspective; others saw a direct link between education and better job opportunities. Furthermore, many of the respondents alleged that their education increased their confidence and made them more mature women. Despite their varying education levels, all the women displayed a strong desire for continuing education. That education took different forms—some women took formal classes outside work, others participated in extra on-the-job training, some performed self-learning at home. Nonformal education seemed to be the most common education pursued by Chinese women factory workers; however, coexistence of all three education types was discovered during the data collection and analysis of the findings.

Results from this qualitative study suggest that education facilitates empowerment through the capability to change one’s perspective. Zeng Wuqi (2015) said her education influenced the way she saw the world: “It is very important to me. It has great influence on my way of seeing the world.” Pan Piao Piao (2015) supposed her education made her confident that she would be a good mother, and she planned on imparting her knowledge onto her future children. She said, “I really want, because I think I will be a good mother. I’m a knowledgeable girl. I know a lot of things. I’ve travelled a lot and I think I can
share these things with my children.” According to Pan Piao Piao, education is a powerful vehicle for her future as well as for the children she plans to have. Thus, her answer validates the notion that education builds not only knowledge, but also confidence and maturity.

Data analysis also reveals that education facilitates empowerment in women through a direct causation between education and better job opportunities. Patrick (1981) as quoted by Nurhayati (2015), states that many people seek additional learning in order to upgrade their skills or prepare for entirely new careers while other groups and individuals look to education as the path to greater opportunity. Zeng Wuqi (2015) assumed her education helped her economically by playing an important role in finding a good job by providing her with the appropriate credentials: “Besides, the diploma also plays an important role in finding a good job.” Ye Xin dropped out of school and began working in the factory at a young age. She acknowledged the value having an education and drew a direct correlation between education levels and income levels. She said, “The higher your education is the higher your salary is” (Ye Xin, 2016). Thus, low levels of education may detract from women’s empowerment because of the limited jobs available to workers with lower levels of education. Chen Jie (2016) dropped out of school after junior high school. “Because of my poor education, the work I do is toilsome, so I think that if I got a good education, my job would be much easier,” she said. She suspected her low level of education forced her into only working toilsome unskilled labor jobs; she claimed that a better education would provide opportunities for more comfortable jobs.
Almost all the participants found an opportunity to continue their education in some manner, whether it was through formal classes outside work, informal education learning from others, or nonformal education through participating in extra on-the-job training or classes offered by their company. At the time of this study, Chen Ping Ping was furthering her education by taking college classes while working. She was getting her bachelor’s degree in Accounting, and like many nontraditional students, she found the balance between working full-time and going to school difficult. Hence, she felt that her studies were suffering and she needed to study harder. Similarly, Shen Jia Jia also had an associate degree and was working toward obtaining a bachelor’s degree. In addition, while working at this job this highly ambitious woman had already become a certified inspector, and continued studying during her spare time to become a certified accountant.

Pan Piao Piao was also furthering her education by learning English at an English learning school franchise branch in China, where many Chinese locals attend to learn English. The school branches in the local area usually have a mixture of native and non-native speakers who teach classes in Business English, English composition as well as Oral English classes. Many adults attend evening classes and weekend classes in order to improve their English. Pan Piao Piao also went beyond formal schooling and educated herself further by reading English books and watching American television shows.

Zhang Yu was also pursuing higher education and working toward obtaining her bachelor’s degree. Additionally, she built her knowledge base and working toward additional certifications.
Informal Education Facilitates Empowerment

It is important to remember that education extends beyond formal schooling: education is not just in school, but also at home. Chen Ping Ping professed the informal education she learned from her parents as an invaluable guidance in her own life. “Their education is indispensable in my life. My father is a bit strict with me, while my mother is more caring. Now the way I do things is influenced by them” (Chen Ping Ping, 2015). Her father was the disciplinarian of the household while her mother was the nurturer. In addition, most participants did some sort of reading at home to educate themselves or others close to them. Shen Jia Jia educated her son by reading to him. Zeng Wuqi (2015) read at home, even though she did not necessarily view this practice as a type of learning. She said, “I am a bit lazy now, and I do not take any [formal] course. All that I do is just do some reading.”

Zhou Jie (2015) also educated herself through reading texts focused on building her skills in business and language: “I buy books online often, books about marketing, English and some novels.” Shen Yuwei read to improve herself within her field of work as well as to pursue her own personal interests. She learned more about management or her field as well as venturing into other fields, such as psychology. Educating herself by building her knowledge base on a specific topic also helped empower Shen Yuwei’s (2015) decision making: “For example, I am to purchase a technical text out of two and the one chosen must be good in quality and low in price. In such case, it will be difficult for me to make a decision, so I have to spend my time on studying specialized knowledge and national standard in this field before making a decision.” Therefore, it can be said
with confidence that pursuing education increases the capability of facilitating agency in these women.

**The Value of Nonformal Education**

Nonformal education appears to be the most common mode of education pursued by Chinese women factory workers. Company-provided opportunities for additional training were seen as valuable by the participants, and if the company provided opportunities for additional training, seemingly most of the women took part. Indeed, several participants educated themselves by participating in different classes held at the worksite and almost all participants wished to learn new skills and tended to participate in the on-the-job training their companies provided. The women that worked in the office at Dan Ta said the company periodically sent them out to do external training, and also provided internal training sometimes. Zhang Yu said she took advantage of the training Rojia Mo provided and also searched for opportunities to build her skills on her own. Yao Cong Cong educated herself and built her skill base through on-the-job training, and Zhou Luying educated herself by participating in the training opportunities provided by the classes at the Huo Guo factory. Finally, Chen Jie (2016) diversified her skills by participating in on-the-job training. Her passion for learning and self-improvement was evident in the kinds of classes that she attended at Huo Guo: “Generally, I attended all kinds of classes available, such as these on insurance, health food, etc.” Regardless of the education level, there was a prevailing desire among all women to learn.

Ma Xuejiao was a primary school dropout but she still possessed a strong desire to educate herself by planning to learning new skills. “As long as I can learn, I will” (Ma
Xuejiao, 2016). Her powerful statement illuminates the perseverance and passion for learning that these women factory workers, who others assume of having no real aspirations, possess. Likewise, Shao Yufen who also dropped out during primary school, desired to learn new skills. Therefore the desire for continued learning is not limited to those with an already advanced education. Hence, these findings justify the argument that the capabilities and opportunities for learning should be available to women at all levels of the workforce.

Contrary to various presumptions, factory work is not only for women with limited education; however, the evidence collected for this dissertation indicates that the women with higher education levels are more likely to work in the factory office rather than on the production floor. All of the participants that work in the factory office had some college education. Most of the participants who worked on the production line completed their education after primary school or junior high. Moreover, some participants voiced that better education would provide opportunities for better jobs. The findings of this research also revealed that not only do many of the unskilled laborers possess certain skills, they also exhibit a desire to learn new skills. Many of the participants acknowledged the significant impact of education, whether it was through job opportunities or a change in their overall perspective. Despite their varying education levels, all the women have a desire for continuing education in some form, and many women feel that they can benefit by taking advantage of additional training or classes provided by their employers. Thus, one can infer that increased opportunities in
education for these women facilitate women’s empowerment by providing the capability to increase agency and achievement in women factory workers in China.

**Defining Success, Achievement and Overcoming Constraints to Empowerment**

Most of the participants in this qualitative investigation were working hard to achieve their goals; however, they did not consider themselves successful. For Zhou Jie, her satisfaction correlated with achievement of goals. She anticipated success and envisioned her happiness continuing into the future. Achievement of goals targeting work and family was a key component of success for these women factory workers. Several participants defined “success” as having a job and family; apparently, a woman was not considered successful without fulfilling both requirements. “Although my career is not so successful, I am content with my life. You see I got married and have a child” (Zhang Yu, 2015). This definition possibly guided the choices these women made in order to realize their goals. “In other words, in assessing whether or not an achievement embodies meaningful choice, have to ask ourselves whether other choices were not only materially possible but whether they were *conceived* to be within the realms of possibility” (Kabeer, 1999, p.442). Shen Jia Jia (2015) was the first and only woman in the study to explicitly state that she was successful. The reason for her success she said was, “I have a happy family, and I have a job.” Shen Jia Jia argued that she was successful because she had a happy family and a job, even though she claimed her career goals had not yet been achieved. When asked if she thought she was successful, Pan Piao Piao simply replied “a little” because she had not begun a family, therefore, she did not think she was successful. Additionally, the participants agreed that a woman was
successful if she improved herself. When asked to define success, Huang Qiudong (2016), another worker interviewed off-site, said, “Self-improvement, for which we should keep making great efforts.” That is, success relies on self-improvement. Therefore, how a woman works to improve herself will vary with each individual. It is important to note that not all these women strived to be successful. Zeng Wuqi did not think success was suitable for her. She was improving, but did not feel like she had accomplished a specific goal; instead; she said she just kept growing. Regardless, Zeng Wuqi believed she had the capability to achieve her goal, and that was crucial to her personal empowerment.

**Constraints on Empowerment**

Results from this study show suggest society has the power to foster or impede women’s empowerment, and even though women have changed, some societal norms, traditions and expectations have not. One social constraint for factory women, and women in general, is that women are strongly encouraged to be modest and tender; assertiveness is not seen as a complimentary trait. Indeed, one woman believed that displaying too much strength or independence increased her difficulty finding a mate. “Yeah I’m too independent. You know why I’m single, because I’m too independent in China. Chinese guy don’t like independent girl.” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). Most of the participants were married; however, some unmarried participants may have felt the constraints of having to still marry and have a child before a certain age. As an unmarried female researcher in her thirties, I was asked countless times by Chinese men and women why I had not married and had children yet. Every time the question felt
more uncomfortable. Currently, women in China are still expected to get married and have a child by their early to mid-twenties. Pan Piao Piao (2015) expressed that even an unmarried woman in her early thirties is almost considered an “old maid” when she said, “I think I should have a goal because you know in China the girl at this age [31] is really old. It’s a funny thing, but we must face it. Sometimes I really want to forget my age.” This puts a great deal of pressure on young women, especially if they have just started working.

Family remains the leading priority with Chinese women. The traditional family structure is still expected and valued, and stigmas against some non-traditional family structures still exist. For instance, there is still a strong stigma against single mothers. Several men I met in China told me they refused to date women who were divorced or had a child out of wedlock. Pan Piao Piao hoped for change in this societal prospective of the nontraditional family. She believed it would be better for woman and relieve a great deal of societal pressure regarding this issue. “It’s not common if you are not married and you have a baby. It’s a stupid question. (Laughter) I hope one day we don’t care about it. The marriage license, everything. So we just want to have baby like that. It will be helpful for every woman” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). Her statement shows a shifting of values with the next generation of Chinese women. They are becoming much more independent. Moreover, they are desiring much more agency and control over their own lives and expectations for the future. Chinese women are beginning to voice for change in the view against non-traditional family structures; however; many still inherently desire for the traditional family structure. Even though Pan Piao Piao hoped
for change in the view against non-traditional family structures, her primary desire was still for the traditional family structure. She wanted to marry and have two children. This also shows a recent shift in urban Chinese families. This woman hoped to have two children instead of one. It must be repeated that as of January 1, 2016, the Chinese government loosened its restrictions on its one-child policy: couples can now have two children instead of only one. Pan Piao Piao desired to have a boy and girl. This also shows a significant shift in Chinese culture. Previously, boys were always preferred over girls. While this still may be true in many parts of China, this woman saw value in having both a girl and a boy.

Family comes first for females in Chinese society, particularly the children. Shao Yufen had only been working for a few years, and had delayed continuing her education in lieu of caring for her children; however, recently she began planning to learn some new skills. Women factory workers are very family oriented, and one main concern is the need for more flexible scheduling so they can take better of their families (e.g., picking up their children from school).

When we are at work, we tend to spend most of the time in the company. As for those who are married, it seems that the time spent at work is a bit too long, and that the time is not flexible. And if their parents do not live with them, it will be very difficult for them to have enough time to look after their children, for in China, it is customary to send the kids to school or to pick them up from school. (Shen Jia Jia, 2015).
Shen Yuwei made great sacrifice for her child. When she began working at Rojia Mo, she lived in the company dormitory, so every morning she would wake up early and ride her bicycle to her house. Once there she would get her child ready and take her to school. After she sent her child to school, she would race back to return to steel factory to begin her shift.

That was really difficult, and I tried very hard to solve it. I lived in the company and every morning I had to get up early to come to my house to send my kid to school. At that time, since I was not so well off that I did not have a motor bike, let alone a car. I have to race my bike at a speed of 15km per hour to 18km per hour, and I also had to ride over very steep bridges. Because no one was available to send my kid to school, I had to do it all by myself. (Shen Yuwei, 2015)

Another story Shen Yuwei told discussed how women in a Chinese family continue to make great sacrifices to care for each other. When her mother had a stroke, Shen Yuwei took care of her mother for 40 days. She and her sister would alternate shifts with her mother. The participant would work days at the factory and then spend nights caring for her mother. Despite this great sacrifice and effort, Shen Yuwei still said she regrets that she did not have enough time and energy to care for her mother properly.

**Findings for Future Study—The Role of Men in Women’s Empowerment**

Murphy-Graham (2010) asserts that men can impede or foster empowerment. In the case of one participant, it was the dominant male in the household that encouraged her to follow her dreams. Pan Piao Piao’s mother wanted her daughter to maintain a more traditional role by becoming a teacher. This clashed with her daughter’s more
progressive view, and the women were at an impasse. It was only through the influence of Pan Piao Piao’s father that the mother was convinced to let her daughter pursue her dreams. Her father noted that if she was forced to just stay in a traditional role, she would become resentful; instead, he encouraged Pan Piao Piao to follow her dream and become responsible for her own life:

In fact, I graduated from Teacher’s University. My mother hope me become a teacher. Then the life will be stable and no big pressure. But I don’t want to be. I want to see this world. So, when I decided to go out and find a job, my mother argue with me for long time. My father convinced my mother let me go. He said, “You should let daughter go. She has her dream. If you just let her in home, maybe someday she will complain with you like that, but if you let her go, it’s her life, she will responsibility for that. So I appreciate my father. I think my life is okay now. (Pan Piao Piao, 2015).

The above account shows that not only men have the capability to impede a woman’s empowerment. Murphy-Graham (2010) says that in order for women’s empowerment to be successful, both men and women must change. In fact, other women have the capability to detract from other women’s empowerment by encouraging women to stay in traditional roles whether that is their choice or not.

**Chapter Summary**

The findings from this qualitative study addressed three specific research questions: how Chinese women factory workers conceptualize self-concept, power, and agency; what were their perspectives regarding structural opportunities such as social
networks, work environments, and education; and how did they overcome obstructions to their achievement? Finally, any additional themes which emerged during the data analysis were scrutinized. The subsequent discourse provides a voice for this community of women, and recasts the image of factory women in China.

The women factory workers in this qualitative study linked their self-concept to their association with others, characterizing themselves in terms regarding how they interacted with other people. Many considered themselves social on at least a minimal level, and believed that a woman’s self—confidence could also affect how other people viewed her. In terms of transformation, some participants experienced a change due to their work environment, while others changed through what they learned; these changes included increased confidence, maturity, and other personality changes. The women viewed their transformations as progression. Their aspirations were both individual and collective in nature, and consisted of both conventional and personal aims. The aspirations of the women in this research study centered on work and family, rather than increasing wealth. Every woman expressed a desire to improve herself.

The participants conceptualized power as interwoven components including a woman’s self-improvement, self-confidence, and behavior. This power did not necessarily have to be sought from within oneself; it could also be sought from a partner. Several participants did not consider themselves strong, but aspired to be strong. The limits of their strength were not universal, and could be guided by social convention and tradition. For most participants, their role within the family did not significantly change, but several participants did take on more responsibilities and gained a voice to speak and
exchange opinions with authority figures such as parents. Findings from this study corroborated the existing literature that the most dominate role in the Chinese family household remained fluid and could be transferred if circumstances dictated; however, mothers, grandparents, and siblings were also named by the participants as influential persons. All the women in this study believed they lacked the capability to influence their surroundings and their status was not high enough to make a difference within their area.

Circumstances usually determined whether decisions were made individually or collectively; more difficult problems were solved collectively while smaller problems were solved individually. Many of the respondents chose to make strategic-life decisions collectively with their family members, though minor decisions or decisions regarding personal affairs were usually handled independently. The capability to obtain and increase economic resources helped to facilitate agency in women, guide their decision making, and may have provided opportunities for greater independence. Rather than personal gains, the women sought economic stability. Responsibility for the financial welfare of the household varied. Nevertheless, many of the women interviewed planned for their own future and the future of other family members.

Social networks thrived both inside and outside the work environment, regardless of status. These networks usually included childhood friends or classmates and workmates. Multilingualism was a common occurrence at every work site, and the women discussed a plethora of topics. Several of the participants stated they had a role model at work which seemed to increase their aspirations. Most participants expressed
some sort of satisfaction with their work and considered their role in the company valuable. Many of the women saw criticism as a chance for improvement, and when dealing with a problem or difficult decision at work, the women would voice their opinion, attempt to fix the problem independently, or ask a third-party for assistance or resolution.

Women with various education levels participated in factory work, and some the participants acknowledged that their education increased their confidence and made them more mature women. Despite their varying education levels, all the women displayed a strong desire for continuing education. Some women took formal classes outside work, others participated in extra on-the-job training, and some performed self-learning at home. Despite their varying education levels, the women acknowledged the significant impact of education, whether it was through job opportunities or a change in their overall perspective. Finally, it was evident that traditional customs and societal pressure still have the power to impede women’s empowerment. Traditional family structure remains the leading priority with Chinese women, and stigmas against some non-traditional family structures still exist. Future research must be conducted to verify whether those values will change over time.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Review of Purpose and Findings

The aim of this dissertation was to explore the vital role of female laborers as Chinese workers and attempt to capture an authentic picture of how Chinese women factory workers perceive themselves and manage the opportunities and vulnerabilities they encounter while working in the factory environment. The intent of this qualitative research study was to give voice to the stories and experiences of Chinese women working in factories, and sought to understand if these women felt that working at the factory increased their status within their family and community and changed the way they made choices for themselves and their families. Educational opportunities and other tools that provide information and support to these women were also examined. Another intent of the research was to discover if constructing social networks helped these women factory workers make more subjective choices, increase their independence, and build a greater awareness of themselves and their role in this world. Finally, this study sought to understand how Chinese women factory workers transformed themselves by flouting protocols of family, history and tradition. Through comprehensive research analysis of interviews and observations, this study examined whether the factory experiences of Chinese women aided an increase in their self-awareness, sense of independence, and ability to make personal choices. Consequently, this field investigation also aimed to redefine the application of empowerment.
The findings from this qualitative study answered the proposed research questions regarding the ways women factory workers in China conceptualized self-concept, power, and agency; their perceptions regarding social networks, work environments, and education; and finally, what strategies they employed to overcome obstructions to their achievement.

Analysis of the data revealed how Chinese women factory workers conceptualized self-concept, power, and agency. Results from this study suggested that Chinese women factory workers related their self-concept to their association with others, and believed that the level of a woman’s self–confidence may affect how she was viewed by those around her. In terms of change, some participants experienced personal transformations due to their work environment, while others changed through what they had learned. These changes included increased confidence, maturity, and other personality changes, which the participants perceived as growth. The participants conceptualized power as interwoven components including a woman’s self-improvement, self-confidence, and behavior, though several participants felt they needed to limit their strength in order to conform to social convention and traditional criterions. Irrespective of their limitations, the women in this investigation displayed hope. Their aspirations centered on work and family, rather than increasing wealth, and every woman expressed a desire to improve herself. These goals tended to be both individual and collective in nature, and consisted of either conventional or personal aims. Roles within the family did not significantly change for most participants, but several women did take on more responsibilities and gained a voice to speak and exchange opinions with more
authoritative members of the family. Family harmony continued to be the main concern for many of the participants, and these women seemed content having the capability to make their own choices, thus signifying their personal agency and empowerment.

In terms of agency and decision making, I found that circumstances usually determined whether decisions were made individually or collectively. Many of the respondents chose to make strategic-life decisions collectively with their family members, though minor decisions or decisions regarding personal affairs were usually handled independently. One of the themes to emerge from my analysis was that the capability to obtain and increase economic resources helped to facilitate agency in women, guide their decision making, and may have provided opportunities for greater independence. Rather than personal gains, the women sought economic stability, and many of the respondents planned for their own future and the future of their family members.

The informants disclosed clear perspectives regarding structural opportunities such as social networks, work environments, and education. I found that social networks thrived both inside and outside the work environment, regardless of status. These networks usually included childhood friends or classmates and workmates. Several of the respondents also stated they had a role model at work, which seemed to increase their career aspirations. Most participants expressed some sort of satisfaction with their work and considered their role in the company valuable. They saw criticism as a chance for improvement, and when dealing with a problem or difficult decision at work, the women would voice their opinion, attempt to fix the problem independently, or ask a third-party
for assistance or resolution. It was also discovered during this study that women with various education levels participated in factory work, and some of the participants acknowledged that their education increased their confidence and made them more mature women. Despite their varying education levels, all the women displayed a compelling desire for continuing education and acknowledged the significant impact of education.

The final research question in this qualitative study addressed how the participants managed constraints to their achievement. Analysis results suggest that traditional customs and societal pressure still have the power to impede women’s empowerment. For instance, one participant mentioned that women were strongly encouraged to be modest and tender, and that displaying too much strength or independence increased her difficulty finding a mate. Additionally, some unmarried participants declared they felt the constraints of having to marry and bear children before a certain age. The traditional family structure is still expected and valued, and stigmas against some non-traditional family structures remain in existence. However, results from this study show a shifting of values with the next generation of Chinese women who are becoming much more independent and desire much more autonomy regarding their own lives and expectations for the future.

**Discussion**

So individual workers are not mere and hapless hostages to the social experience. Rather, they are pressed to actively engage with it, even if only to rebuff it. It is these interplays that make up individuals’ learning as they construe what they
experience and construct a response that has legacies for both the individual (i.e. learning) and the workplace. (Billet, 2008, p.53)

This qualitative dissertation adds to the multitude of literature addressing women’s empowerment, but redefines it in regards to women factory workers in China. This study navigates the many theories of women’s empowerment and agency by concentrating on women’s self-expression, self-transformation, increased access to and control of various resources, increased ability to make strategic choices and decisions, and transcendence of traditional social constructs. It substantiates other studies which note that agency, empowerment and achievement within the community of Chinese women factory workers can happen through various tools and avenues. When addressing the question of whether Chinese women factory workers display more individualism or collectivism in their choices and understanding these social frameworks in which they prioritize their needs, expectations and interests, the study findings broadly align with Kabeer (1999) who argues that the conditions of choice require one to consider possible alternatives, vantage points, and consequences of choice. Thus, the severity of the situation usually determined whether the participants made decisions individually or collectively. The findings in this dissertation also corroborate the existing study by Ma and Jacobs (2010) which reveals signs of self-agency in Chinese factory women who actively worked to shape their own lives. The Chinese women factory workers in this qualitative investigation also demonstrated signs of self-agency in their decision-making and actively took steps to increase their economic resources and plan for not only their future, but the future of other family members.
Discoveries from this enquiry validated the existing literature that supposed the most dominate role in the Chinese family household remained fluid and could be transferred if circumstances dictated, therefore mothers, grandparents, and siblings possessed the capability to become the most influential person in the household. In addition, this study aligns with other studies which illuminate the trend of Chinese families becoming more nuclear, with the husband-wife relationship becoming more central. Most of the participants lived in nuclear households separate from parents. Although this investigation does align with some studies which have questioned whether Chinese family members have shifted their values from collective interests to individual interests (Xia, Xu, 2014), most families in the study remain an amalgamation of both collective and individual values and interests, including marriage. Results were consistent with previous research purporting the argument that marriage remains an integral rite of passage for most Chinese people, and divorce or single-parent homes are not yet considered as acceptable alternatives.

During the investigation, several participants exclaimed that their departments felt like a family; in almost all scenarios examined for this dissertation, work departments maintained a type of familial hierarchy. These findings align with the theory by Pun Ngai (2007) which states that at the factory, a type of “sisterhood” is formed. This sisterhood, and other social networks, seemed to nurture the increase of social capital among the women in my study. This concept also supports the notion by Lee (1995) who states that although the unity among all Chinese women factory workers may be imperfect, a development of empowerment will remain with some women. Lastly, this
study echoes the argument of Ma and Jacobs (2010) that even though these women were able to demonstrate substantial personal agency, at times they had to make personal sacrifices (Ma, Jacobs, 2010) including physical separation from their families, the inability to complete their formal education, or adjusting work schedules to care for family members.

Due to its many theories and various applications, defining women’s empowerment and agency can be challenging. Thus, several findings from this study run counter to some conventional approaches to women’s empowerment. Many scholars and organizations tout a human capital approach in regards to the economic empowerment of women; however, findings from this study revealed that an increase in economic resources does not automatically equate an increase in quality of life. Even though Shen Jia Jia said she earned a higher salary at the Dan Ta factory, she complained that she had less family time. Even though much of the recent empowerment literature seems to give precedence to paid work over alternatives types of empowerment (Seeberg, 2016); this statement by Shen Jia Jia is evidence that better pay does not equal in value to better parenting. Hence, it should not be assumed that the economic empowerment of women always produces positive consequences.

Although these findings were generally compatible with the existing literature, they also differed regarding the structure and operation of the Chinese family household. When Zeng Wuqi described her relationship with her husband, she said they resembled a typical Chinese family. In her eyes, and the corresponding literature, within the traditional Chinese family structure the dominant male (in this case, her husband) made
the significant decisions; nevertheless, Zeng Wuqi admitted that she and her husband made most decisions together. Her admission refutes the common perception of a typical Chinese family. Additionally, researchers like Xu and Xia (2014) argue that Chinese family values and relationships have been impacted by the changes in Chinese society, government and education, and although family collectivism is still needed and valued, cultural values like filial duty is challenged by an increasing emphasis on individualism. However, results from this study showed that the respondents still felt a filial duty to their parents or grandparents, and included their care in their future plans and aspirations. Finally, results from this field investigation rebut Cheng’s (1939) argument that unmarried daughters hold the lowest status in traditional Chinese family household. Even though some of the participants were not married, they had already established a position within the household and their opinions held value with the rest of the family. This revelation divulges a critical shift in the bounds of the traditional Chinese family.

**Challenges and Limitations During the Research**

This dissertation study was conducted from January 2015 through August 2016, using a basic interpretative qualitative approach to examine several elements of empowerment in female factory workers in the Yangtze River Delta region of the People’s Republic of China.

Several factors contributed to the possible limitations of the study. Some difficulties occurred while conducting this cross-cultural investigation. I was granted access to some factories in China due to my status as a foreign researcher, but access to other factories was denied for the very same reason. Initially, recruiting participants for
this study was a challenge. Due to the topography of the research area, I was unable to follow my original strategy to recruit participants through random chance meetings. Written advertisements also failed to yield volunteers. Another challenge was the establishment of trust. As previously mentioned in this dissertation, some factory owners were not comfortable with a foreign researcher speaking to their staff. They may have feared “losing face” (i.e. embarrassment, losing respect) due to any negative reporting about their factory or workers. Personal experience taught me that many Chinese people take time to establish a genuine trusting connection with foreigners; one is carefully kept at a distance until deemed trustworthy enough to welcome into the fold. Fortunately, I was able to use professional and personal connections to gain access to obtain volunteers to participate in the study. My limited proficiency in Standard Chinese also made direct contact with the participants challenging. To counter the risk of losing valuable data in translation, I employed a native of the research area to accompany me and verbally translate during the interviews. I also hired a translator and back translator to listen to the recorded files and capture any nuances in the language that may have been missed during the face-to-face interviews.

Some readers may be critical of this dissertation for several factors. For instance, there were no particularized discussions regarding specific wages and working conditions. A cursory glance was only given to these specific topics for two reasons. Foremost, a myriad of field investigations regarding the earnings and work environments for factory workers in China have already saturated the existing literature. Secondly, regardless of the connections I made in China, several factory owners expressed
trepidation of me talking to their workers. In fact, the owners of the Nai Cha factory asked me to send them a copy of my interview questions before I was granted access to their factory. Therefore, it was important for any questions asking about salary or working conditions appear innocuous. Other critics may feel that this dissertation only shows a positive image of women factory workers in China, thus accusing me of creating my own skewed image of factory women. Notwithstanding, I counter this argument with my own statement that by providing this more positive portrayal of the lives of women factory workers in China, this dissertation adds a critical component to a field of critical literature inundated with studies depicting factory women as helpless individuals who, for the sake of a better life, have no choice but to subject themselves to atrocious work environments, wage manipulation, and corrupted leadership. Thus, by contributing multiple stories to the single story of the female factory worker in China, this dissertation establishes Intersectionality the existing literature of women factory workers in China.

Other reviewers may argue that not all the women that participated in this research study were actual “factory women.” To those detractors, I reiterate that the term “factory women” is an external label used to categorize women who labor in factories. This dissertation underwrites the study by Zhang (2007) which elucidates that women factory workers in China do not even identify themselves as “factory women.” Finally, some readers may be critical of the limited time spent with the participants. Although I did not conduct an ethnographic study, the time spent with all the participants was meaningful. All interviews were recorded, and the contact information collected allowed for the possibility of follow up if necessary.
Summary of Study Significance

This dissertation serves as a counter narrative argument which disputes the commonly held belief that women factory workers in China are low-level educated women subjected to the oppression of a patriarchal society. It also illustrates the importance of women’s self-expression, and adds to the literature by revealing how female factory workers in China increase self-concept, power, and agency within the factory environment. Unlike previous studies, this dissertation scrutinizes the gradual transformation of Chinese women factory workers as well as their patterns of interaction, attitudes, and breakdowns of certain traditional values. Information from this dissertation study may be used to establish a more profound understanding of the lives of women factory workers in China and how they value education, characterize themselves, foster agency and overcome obstructions to their achievement inside and out of the rigorous factory environment. Finally, elements of this study can be applied to women factory workers in other countries (e.g., Bangladesh, Cambodia, Thailand, etc.).

Implications of Findings

The findings from this report highlighted a number of soft values which cannot be quantified, but no less constitute empowerment. The study shows that women factory workers link their self-concept to their association with others, and there is suggestive evidence that a more positive self-concept may increase the likelihood of a woman feeling empowered. The manner of self-expression and self-concept of women are key factors to women’s empowerment in addition to how they envision their status and ability to make choices regarding themselves and their families. Positive self-description and
self-concept in women are critical components of women’s empowerment. Findings from this study revealed that women who described themselves in a more positive light were most likely to have goals and work towards achieving those goals. Thus, a more positive self-concept may increase the likelihood of a woman feeling empowered. Conversely, a woman who has a negative concept of self may be less likely to feel empowered. Indeed, how a woman conceptualizes herself and her place in the world can either help facilitate or detract from her empowerment.

Perhaps the most surprising implication of the analysis results is the notion that having the capability for self-improvement constitutes empowerment. Zhang Yu had taken steps towards making her life better because she felt that she could not enjoy her life if it remained stagnant with no improvement. She said, “Because in my view, if I do not improve myself, there will be no joy in my life” (Zhang Yu, 2016). On the face of it, this desire for development would suggest that self-improvement may constitute empowerment as an important factor for happiness. Nussbaum (2001) argues that once a woman has developed certain capabilities, she no longer desires to be the person she once was. In fact, one participant extended this argument when she advocated taking accountability for improving one’s quality of life. “Life has its quality; it’s up to you. If you want to be what [a certain kind of] person, you can do it” (Pan Piao Piao, 2015). In other words, success relies on self-improvement. Hence, the strategies a woman executes to improve herself will vary with each individual.

Many of the women used some form of education as a tool for their self-improvement. The modern Chinese perception of education still fashions itself, in part,
from Confucian foundations. Rita Ng (2009) purports that Confucianism emphasized filial piety, obedience, and character building. She says, “He viewed education as a means of transformation, the discovery of human nature, and the cultivation of character. Through education, virtues are developed and integrated.” (Ng, 2009, p. 2). Although the teachings of Confucius were designed for men, this purpose of education applies to the women in this study. “The whole process of Confucian learning involves enriching the self and refining one’s wisdom to be considerate of others” (Ng, 2009 p. 3). Similarly, the women continued their learning in order to enrich themselves. The women educated themselves in different ways. This education for self-improvement can lead to empowerment. Thus, all forms of education (not just formal schooling) should be considered as facilitators of empowerment.

Finally, results from this study confirm that having goals are extremely important to women factory workers in China. Billet states that the agency of an individual plays a key role “in the processes of learning and remaking cultural practices” (2008, p. 40). Having aspirations is a key component to facilitating women’s empowerment. Implications of these finding show that when a woman has aspirations, she has hope for herself and for others close to her. These goals may consist of both conventional and personal aims. For example, Chen Ping Ping had two main goals: the first was the conventional Chinese female norm of getting married, and the second was the personal aim to improve her work which she believed she must do in order to guarantee a good future for herself. Some women used education or saw education as a beneficial means to achieving their goal, including taking classes on and off the job site, or educating
themselves at home. Once again, the aspirations of the women in this research study rarely centered on instrumental gains like obtaining greater wealth; instead normative goals like maintaining a harmonious household were the primary focus for most participants. Therefore, this qualitative dissertation supports the argument for a normative definition of women’s empowerment based on values and culture, rather than an instrumental approach which primarily pursues singular achievement.

**Contribution to the Research**

This dissertation contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, this cross-cultural investigation of Chinese factory workers was conducted in an area rarely included by other researchers. This dissertation adds to the literature by focusing on women factory workers in the Yangtze River Delta Region, creating a more inclusive picture of women factory workers in the People’s Republic of China. In addition, the emphasis on education makes this study distinctive from other scholarly works about women factory workers in China.

Moreover, this dissertation adds new research that takes center stage in the lives of women factory workers. Although women factory workers in China are a marginalized community, within this group are individuals who challenge tradition, define their own integrity, and make their own choices, and work toward their personal achievement. This situation is not limited to women factory workers in China; millions of women factory workers help sustain the manufacturing backbone of global corporations across the world. Elements of this study can be applied to women factory workers in other countries (e.g., Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, Nicaragua, etc.).
Qualitative research such as this study is needed to establish a richer understanding of the lives of female factory workers all over the world and how they foster agency while working within the factory environment. As a result, this dissertation augments the current literature in this field because it highlights Chinese women factory workers who are setting precedents while constructing another meaning of women’s empowerment.

Focusing on Chinese women factory workers in this dissertation contributes to the substantive research of women’s empowerment. The women in this dissertation present genuine gauges of an established disposition and provide an immense array of experience not addressed by previous investigations. In this study, the meaning of women’s empowerment breaks from established processes and shows that developing women’s empowerment may equally be part of continuous evolving navigation of a single group or stand alone as an exceptional and challenging achievement. It is the expectation of this researcher that this dissertation study of Chinese women factory workers will provide some direction for future research of female factory workers around the globe.

**Recommendations**

I drew on this field investigation to generate several recommendations for further research. First, statements from the participants inferred an interesting concept that a woman’s self-confidence may also affect how other people view her; therefore, if a woman has confidence in herself, people will look at her differently. Expansion on this concept may reveal a key facilitator of women’s empowerment and requires more evaluation in a future study. Additionally, traditional family structure remains the leading priority with Chinese women, and stigmas against some non-traditional family
structures still exist. Therefore, future research must be conducted to verify how those values may change over time. Greater discussion regarding the influence of the internet and mobile applications like WeChat, Alipay, etc. is also needed since they have become an integral part of modern Chinese society. Finally, since this dissertation stands among the extremely few qualitative research studies which emphasize education in relation to factory women, more qualitative studies are needed to thoroughly examine how women factory workers value education and its impact on their lives and character.

**Recommended Actions for Empowerment**

One way women show empowerment is when they invite others to join them to make change. All the women in this study believed they lacked the capability to influence their local surroundings and their status was not high enough to make a difference within their area. This collective mentality can be disadvantageous to their empowerment. Consequently, action must be taken to sufficiently contravene this negative perception; however, I believe it would most likely require a large shift within the culture in order to ensure long-lasting effects. One step toward building the confidence in these women may be the increase of female role models in their lives. Some participants expressed the value of having role models—some saw certain family members as role models, while other participants had role models at work. In their qualitative study, Ma and Jacobs (2010) suggest that work environments need to facilitate opportunities for agency by creating a context for positive relations among the workers. My qualitative study indicates that having female role models at work had a positive effect on the participants and even increased the aspirations of some to become more diligent,
strong, and economically successful. Therefore, I recommend that companies establish some sort of role model mentor program for women employees at all levels of the organization.

The Precarious Future of Factory Women

On January 31, 2016, Reuters reported that falling prices and overcapacity had slowed the manufacturing industry in China. Although China maintains the reputation of the “world’s factory,” the China Labour Bulletin states that China is currently considered in “mid-range of Asian countries in terms of cheap labor” (2017), and numerous companies, particularly shoe and toy manufacturers have moved their factories out of China to cheaper locations in other countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Vietnam. As a result, layoffs of factory workers are inevitable. According to the China Labour older unskilled factory laborers suffer the greatest impact from these layoffs. The authors state that age discrimination is deeply ingrained in the workplace in China and many unskilled and low-skilled workers over the age of 40 have difficulty finding new employment.

Hudson Lockett (2016) states that work in Chinese factories is no longer as steady and opportunities do not abound as they did in previous years. He states in 2014 more than 40% of the migrant workforce comprised of laborers over the age of 40, and that lack of job security could drastically affect the aging workforce. What does this mean for the older women that work in the factories? What opportunities are available for them after the factory? Lockett argues that as the manufacturing boom continues to wane, job capacity has transitioned from the manufacturing industry to the service sector.
However, this does not fare well for the aging labor force. “Many older workers can only get low paid and irregular jobs in small family workshops or as security guards, sanitation workers, hospital porters, etc.” (China Labour Bulletin, 2017). This statement supports what I witnessed while living in China. All the custodians, dormitory monitors, and maintenance workers at the college where I worked were all over 40 years old. The guards at the factories I visited all appeared to be over 40 years old; and all the street cleaners I encountered in China looked over the age of forty. Zhou Luying explained that it was typical for people in their forties to have some sort of savings for the future. The average age of the participants for this dissertation study was 37 years of age.

Considering the precariousness of the current manufacturing industry, it is uncertain how many of those women will still be working at those factories in the next several years after they turn 40. This is why scholars like Billet (2008) encourage learning throughout one’s work life. Learning should “be mediated by the personal agency and intentionality of the individual. This learning occurs as workers enact their subjectivity in attempts to secure and realize ontological security in changing work requirements” (Billet, 2008, p. 55). In the meantime, the Chinese manufacturing industry will continue to play an important role in the country and millions of factory employees and their families for many years to come.

**Autobiographical Reflection**

I began this dissertation research study with the aim of learning more about the lives of women that worked at factories in China. I felt drawn to discover more about their self-awareness, hope, and determination for a better future, and wanted to share their
stories and experiences. Through meeting these women in person and conducting this study, I not only received answers to my research questions, I gained a much richer understanding of their values, perceptions, dreams, and passions. Their openness, confidence, strength, independence, and comradery both impressed and inspired me.

I gained invaluable experience while undertaking this cross-cultural research endeavor, and established guidelines for conducting future cross-cultural studies. I was forced to anticipate, examine, and immediately confront any internal and external biases. I worked extremely hard for months to overcome racial barriers, dispel a myriad of stereotypes, and established a level of trust with my coworkers, research team and participants. I also comprehended the need for flexibility when conducting field studies, particularly studies overseas. As a result, I have reevaluated my professional values and increased my own self-awareness. For instance, this research process has taught me that every component of the data collection processed must be scrutinized in cross-cultural qualitative research and even minor oversights (i.e., using inexperienced transcribers) by the researcher or anyone involved with the research can affect the validity of the data. Hence, vigilance and preemptive steps taken before data collection and analysis are indispensable. I intend to put these lessons into practice when conducting qualitative studies in the future.

**Final Words**

Qualitative research is necessary to establish a better understanding of the lives of female factory workers in China and how they foster agency within the demanding factory environment. This research study adds to the definition of women’s
empowerment and gives voice to a community of women with limited agency who understand their cultural traditions and customs, but do not allow those traditions and customs to rule them. The transformative experiences the participants expressed in this dissertation fills a void left by previous reports about factory women in China, and sets a precedent for future qualitative field investigations of women factory workers. Self-realization and power comes from the women factory workers from this investigation because they noticed the personal transformations within themselves, recognized a sense of purpose, and developed a sense of service that no one has imposed upon them. It is the intent of this researcher to continue adding to the meaning of women’s empowerment by performing additional studies which construct a clear and comprehensive depiction of marginalized women, and making meaning of how they perceive themselves and their positions within the public and private sphere.
APPENDIXES
APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION—FACTORY WOMEN PARTICIPANTS
Appendix A

Demographic Information—Factory Women Participants

ID#____________
Date____________

1. Age ___________ years

2. Highest education level __________________________

3. Province of birth __________________________

4. Months/years you have lived in Zhejiang province __________________

5. What is your current marital status? (Please circle one)
   a) Single
   b) Divorced
   c) Married

6. How many children do you have?

7. What languages do you speak?

8. Are you currently taking any classes to further your education? If yes, what classes are you taken?

9. Who is the most important person in your family?

10. Has your role in the family changed since you started working at the factory?

11. What do you do when you have to make a difficult decision?

12. Do you believe that you make a difference in your community?

13. Do you like working at the factory?

14. Do you do any extra on-the-job training to learn new tasks?

15. Do you believe that you are able to help yourself provide for your future?

16. If you have any, what are your goals for your future?
人口统计信息-工厂女性参与者

ID#_____________  日期_____________

1. 年龄 __________岁

2. 最高学历__________________

3. 出生省____________________

4. 你在浙江省待了多久？___________________

5. 你目前的婚姻状况是？（请圈一个）
   a) 单身
   b) 离婚
   c) 已婚

6. 你有多少个孩子？

7. 你说什么语言？

8. 目前你有在上一些培训班或夜校，成人大学吗？如果有，是什么培训班，上什么培训课？

9. 谁是你家族中重要的人？

10. 你开始在工厂工作后，你在家庭中的角色发生了什么转变？

11. 当你必须做出一个艰难的决定时，你会怎么做？

12. 你认为你对自己所居住的小区有什么影响或起什么作用吗？

13. 你喜欢在工厂工作吗？

14. 你会在职培训时做些额外的工作，从而学习新的技能或任务吗？

15. 你认为你能够帮助自己创造未来吗？

16. 你对你的未来有什么的目标吗？
APPENDIX B

AUDIOTAPE/VIDEO CONSENT FORM
Appendix B

Audiotape/Video Consent Form

Rising Valor: A Research Study of Chinese Women Working in Factories, Educating Themselves and Others, While Redefining Women's Empowerment

Principal Investigator Vilma Seeberg

I agree to participate in an audio-taped interview about Chinese women working in factories as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Kristine Newton may audio-tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

________________________________________
________________________________________
Signature Date

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

_____want to listen to the recording  _____do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them. Kristine Newton may / may not (circle one) use the audio-tapes/video tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

_____this research project _____publication _____presentation at professional meetings

________________________________________
________________________________________
Signature Date
录音/录像知情同意书

崛起的勇气：研究中国工厂女工，鼓励他们进行自我教育

并对他进行教育，以此重新定义女性权利

主要调查人员：威尔玛 塞贝克 (Vilma Seeberg)

我同意参加该研究项目有关中国工厂女工的录音访谈，并同意调查人员将录音用作数据分析。我同意克里斯汀·牛顿录制此次访谈。访谈的日期、时间和地点须由调查人员与调查参与者共同商定。

________________________________________
签名
日期

调查参与者有权在录音使用之前听取访谈录音。我决定：

____ 听取访谈录音 _____ 不听取访谈录音

如不想听取访谈录音，请在下方签字。如想听取访谈录音，则听完录音之后需按照要求签字。

克里斯汀·牛顿 可以 / 不得 使用包含本人的音频/视频资料。录音带或录像带的原始文件可以用于：

______ 研究项目，发表于______ 刊物，并可用在______ 专家会议上用作陈述材料。

______________________________________________
签名
日期
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT BY PARTIAL WAIVER

ON PART OF THE FACTORY WOMEN PARTICIPANTS
Appendix C

Informed Consent by Partial Waiver

On Part of the Factory Women Participants

**Study Title:** Rising Valor: A research study of Chinese women working in factories, educating themselves and others, while redefining women’s empowerment

**Principal Investigator:** Vilma Seeberg

**Purpose:**
The purpose of the study is to develop a better understanding of any economic or social changes Chinese women working in the factory experience, and to identify ways female factory workers in China think about themselves, and how they manage the opportunities and obstacles they face.

**Procedures**
The information will be collected from the following: a questionnaire, a one-time in-person interview which will last approximately 45 minutes long. During the interview, I will ask you 50 questions about your experiences at the factory and at home, how you think about yourself, and how you handle difficulties in your life. You will be asked to participate in the questionnaire or interview depending on how you can be accessed. A consent form will be sent to the women who participate in this study. The results from the study will be published in a paper about Chinese women working in factories.

**Benefits**
This research will not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will help us have a better understanding of the complex lives of Chinese women working in factories and their real experiences working at the factory.

**Risks and Discomforts**
There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. Participation in the research has no impact on your employment.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**
No identifying information will be collected. Your signed consent form will be kept separate from the study information, and responses will not be linked or provided to you.
Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Kristine Newton at (614-307-0463). This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about the rights of the research participants or complaints about the research, you may contact the IRB.

Consent Statement and Signature

_I have witnessed the consent process and believe that I have been fully informed, understand the project and what participants will have to do, and have voluntarily agreed to participate._

Participant Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________
工厂女性参与者
部分豁免条款知情同意书

研究标题：崛起的勇气：研究中国工厂女工，鼓励她们进行自我教育，并对他人进行教育，以此重新定义女性权利。

主要调查人员：威尔玛·塞贝克 (Vilma Seeberg)

研究目的：
本次研究旨在帮助人们更好地了解中国工厂女工所经历的经济与社会变革，认识中国工厂女工对于自身的看法，以及他们如何应对机遇与挑战。

研究过程
本次研究将会通过下列方式搜集相关信息：调查问卷以及一对一访谈的方式，每次访谈将会持续大约45分钟。面试过程中调查研究人员将会就女工在工厂与家庭中的个人经历提问50个问题，例如，你怎样看待自己以及你怎样处理生活中遇到的困难。女工需要参与调查问卷或一对一访谈，这取决于女工所选择的评估方式。参与调查的女性将会收到一份知情同意书。研究结果将刊登在一份有关中国工厂女工的论文中。

好处
本次研究将会使你直接受益。如果你能参与此次调查，这将帮助我们对中国工厂女工的复杂生活环境以及真实工作经历有一个更为详细的了解。

风险与不便
调查研究不会带来超出日常风险以外的其他风险。参与调查不会对自身就业情况产生影响。

保密与隐私
本次调查不会搜集个人信息。研究信息以及被调查人员签订的知情同意书将会被分别保管。本次调查采用不记名的方式，调查结束后不再向调查参与者提供反馈。

自愿参与
本次调查研究采取完全自愿原则。可以拒绝参与调查，也可以在任何时间停止参与调查，这些不会带来任何惩罚性后果，也不会对现有利益带来任何损失。

联系方式
如有疑问或对本调查存在疑虑，请拨打614-307-0463联系克里斯汀·牛顿 (Kristine Newton)。该项目由肯特州立大学审查委员会批准。如对调查参与者的相关权利存在疑问，或对调查研究持有投诉意见，请联系审查委员会 (IRB)。

同意声明与签名
我了解许可流程且完全知情，了解该研究项目以及项目参与者该做什么，并据此自愿同意参与调查。

_________________________________  __________________
参与者签名  日期
Informed Consent by Partial Waiver
On part of the Factory Women Participants

Study Title: Rising Valor: A research study of Chinese women working in factories, educating themselves and others, while redefining women's empowerment

Principal Investigator: Vilma Seeberg

Purpose:
The purpose of the study is to develop a better understanding of any economic or social changes Chinese women working in the factory experience, and to identify ways female factory workers in China think about themselves, and how they manage the opportunities and obstacles they face.

Procedures:
The information will be collected from the following: a questionnaire, a one-time impersonal interview which will last approximately 45 minutes long. During the interview, I will ask you 50 questions about your experiences at the factory and at home, how you think about yourself, and how you handle difficulties in your life. You will be asked to participate in the questionnaire or interview depending on how you can be accessed. A consent form will be sent to the women who participate in this study. The results from the study will be published in a paper about Chinese women working in factories.

Benefits:
This research will not benefit you directly. However, your participation in this study will help us have a better understanding of the complex lives of Chinese women working in factories and their real experiences working at the factory.

Risks and Discomfort:
There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. Participation in the research has no impact on your employment.

Privacy and Confidentiality:
No identifying information will be collected. Your signed consent form will be kept separate from the study information, and responses will not be linked or provided to you.
AUDIOTAPE/VIDEO CONSENT FORM

Rising Valor: A Research Study of Chinese Women Working in Factories, Educating Themselves and Others, While Redefining Women's Empowerment

Principal Investigator Vikima Seeberg

I agree to participate in an audio-taped interview about Chinese women working in factories as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Kristine Newton may audio-tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

Signature ___________________________ Date ____________

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I

_____ want to listen to the recording

_____ do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.

Kristine Newton may / may not (circle one) use the audio-tapes/video tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

_____ this research project

_____ publication

_____ presentation at professional meetings

Signature ___________________________ Date ____________
REFERENCES
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