

## ADVERTISING GENDER EQUALITY

# Social pressures, not bias, hold

The rise of women leaders in the China's ad industry stands in sharp contrast to the residual

Less stigma about female leadership in China means there is no obvious 'glass ceiling' limiting the careers of women with drive and ambition — but advertising executives say societal pressures around marriage and parenting continue to deter many from reaching their full potential and form a persistent barrier to progress towards a gender-balanced industry.

Unlike in the West, where conversations around the 'glass ceiling' centre around conscious, or unconscious, doubts about female competency within a corporate environment, women in Mainland China tend to have more of an equal chance at leadership.

Instead, they have to battle against an oppressive social culture that believes that a woman, however successful, is a failure if she isn't married and a mother by the age of 30.

TBWA Greater China CEO, Joanne Lao says hang-ups about the derogatory "leftover women" tag cause women to pull back from pursuing an ambitious career path.

Tan Tze Kiat, CEO of BBDO Greater China, says she has met women who walked away from top roles for fear it would jeopardise their chances at a family. "Chinese women themselves are saying, 'I need

a life, and time for husbands and children,'" says Tan, who has two daughters herself.

"I had a great account director who wanted to go back to Malaysia to be a good mum instead of being promoted.

"Another art director was successful in her field until she had a child at 33. She thought she could afford to leave her job for a while to look after her baby without hurting her career. Now 37 years old, she has problems getting rehired because after such a long maternity leave, her skills are outdated."

For women who have either leapt the marriage hurdle or have opted to face down societal pressure, however, the path to the boardroom is relatively open to them.

In May, Publicis Media Greater China CEO, Bertilla Teo, named women to CEO roles for each of the four agency brands under her purview: Sapna Nemani at Starcom, Siew Ping Lim at Zenith, Scarlett Shih at MediaVest Spark, and Sandy Lai at Opti-Media Blue 449.

WPP China's Bessie Lee, and Isobar's Jean Lin and Jane Lin-Baden have long been poster girls for female executives in the industry. Sheena Jeng from Publicis Worldwide China, mean-

while, is one of the rare female creatives in the market.

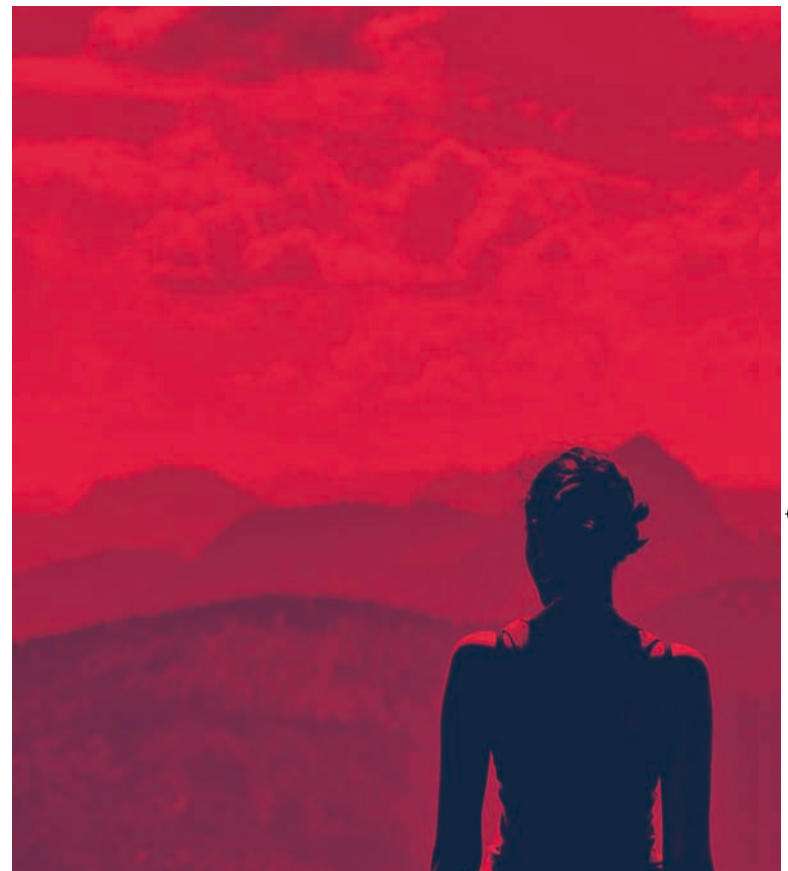
On the client side in China, there is strong and recognised female leadership as well: Asmita Dubey from L'Oréal, Jalin Wu from Uniqlo, Weiwei Yao from PepsiCo, Joey Wat from KFC, Vivian Pan from Visa and Freda Wang from Mercedes-Benz, to name a few.

"At the professional level, women are not treated in a discriminatory way or unfairly; there are equal opportunities for us," says Tan.

In fact, these women who "persist in climbing the ladder" often achieve higher ranks, faster, than their Western sisters, says Dianne Brak, CEO of Creative Fuse.

Nevertheless, female leaders are still a relatively new phenomenon in China. When Teo announced her all-female CEO lineup for Publicis Media, she was still asked why "it's all women". "Nobody would care if it's an all-male cast, but why question when it's all women?" she says. "Maybe I'm so used to operating in this environment. I'm not so fussed about whether it's a man or woman who leads. It's business as usual."

Teo adds that she has yet to come across a woman who declined career advancement.



In perspective... determined women can rise to the very top in

### Family first

Despite the existence of a number of high-profile female high-fliers, overall, the ratio of women-to-men in the top tier of China's advertising industry is just one to nine, states Brak, of Creative Fuse,

based on a survey specifically for this article. "It seems obvious that China is lagging behind the rest of the world. I think this is due to strong family values and the importance of family life in a female's mind," she says, add-

## BIG IDEAS Gender equality has made great progress in corporate China, but there is still a long way to go

I have been working in Shanghai for four years now, and I have seen over the last few years a clear rise to power for women in advertising.

According to recent statistics shared with me, males are still dominating the C-suite at 70 percent, yet a study published by

Bain & Company showed that female graduates in China initially make up 46 percent of the working population in terms of "professional positions".

Where it gets interesting to me is the hope of 72 percent of these graduates to become C-level executives. This is very



Julie Marchesseault

encouraging and pushing us women already in leadership roles to continue to inspire them.

While agencies and marketing jobs often have a high representation of women, this tends to be less true as one climbs higher up the ladder. On the other hand, the number of

Chinese women with top management roles, especially in private companies — at our clients' or partners' organisations — is rising.

Overall, I have found that the conflicts women have to go through in China is comparable to Europe, where I come from. I am

# women back

stigma about 'leftover women', writes Jenny Chan

forced to choose between career or family. "Churning out ideas at 2am, spontaneously, means more stress," she says. "More stress than account-servicing jobs that have set procedures and processes."

For better or for worse, family life is paramount in China. Debby Cheung, China president of Ogilvy Public Relations, says that can mean careers take a back seat.

"Chinese working women will start preparing for pregnancy one year before, in a widely-accepted practice called 'bèi-yùn' [备孕], and they are not shy to tell everyone," she says. This social practice, which isn't observed in other Chinese-speaking countries, could be read as a message to her bosses to dial back ahead of maternity leave. "This will definitely impact her career. But, if having a family comes first, that is a personal preference."

## Sexist views

Another hurdle women have to overcome in the industry is overt sexism from male colleagues. Women in account-servicing roles within advertising and PR firms face "huge prejudices" in terms of their looks versus what they can do, reveals Jacqui Barratt, director at Font Talent. "I have

heard it myself from CEOs who look me in the eye and tell me that the reason their clients stay is because their account managers look so hot," she says. "It's never great."

Charles Voon, GM of TBWA Digital Arts Network, shares a quote from an anonymous female colleague that echoes this: "I was told to use my hotness instead of my smarts to get ahead." This quote, among many others, was collected as part of TBWA's #TakeTheLead2020 internal initiative to increase female leadership within the agency globally by 20 per cent by 2020.

"These are real issues that are happening in the industry," adds TBWA's Lao. "These stereotypes are holding people back — both men and women. I'd personally like to create a professional world in China where women feel like they do not have to choose, but can have both family and a career. From that perspective, being 'leftover' is a choice that is accepted positively and not a degrading description."

**Our View:** It's a case of the devil and the deep sea, but a satisfying career and family life can and should go hand in hand. Please write to [emily.tan@haymarket.asia](mailto:emily.tan@haymarket.asia)

part of the Publicis Worldwide China management committee, which is composed of half women and half men — which was not the case in my previous experience in North America.

In China, the mindset of successful women is not one where you have to 'act

more like a man to be more successful'.

Successful women in China somehow naturally combine ambition, dedication to their personal and professional life, and the assertion of their beauty as women.

Overall, I believe China has achieved good results

in promoting gender equality in this industry, but we need to keep our chin up and continue to close the gap and put in place the right support system so that more women ascend to the C-suite.

**Julie Marchesseault,** CEO, Nurun Greater China



China, despite push to conform

ing that this defies logic as Chinese women make three-quarters of all purchase decisions.

BBDO's Tan explains that the creative industry's long hours and the nature of the job can make women feel

## Craig Davis on Ideas...

# The new world is better and cheaper

Conventional business thinking says that high-quality services cost more than their low-quality competitors. Our lexicon is full of references to this idea: "If you pay peanuts you get monkeys", for example, or, "Do you want it right or do you want it cheap?" But the idea that good things take time and are, therefore, more expensive is now patently untrue.

The old ways of working with time, cost and quality no longer apply. Software allows services to be delivered better and cheaper than ever before. Xero provides a high-quality accounting experience 24/7 at a fraction of the cost of a CPA. Uber offers a better user experience than taxis both digitally and atomically, and it's cheaper. AirBNB purveys an eclectic mix of places to stay that are more interesting than cookie-cutter hotels, and they're very often cheaper.

Even within the tech-driven services sector the same forces are at work. It explains why Spotify and Netflix have each taken big bites out of Apple's iTunes; they're better and cheaper.

My partners and I are building a software business called Sendle which is doing a similar thing in small business logistics. With the power of technology, we can provide a significantly better logistics experience for less money.

In the marketing sector, services provided by the likes of Hubspot, Hootsuite, Invision, Canva, Salesforce, Squarespace, Wordpress and many others, deliver solutions for clients more accurately, more conveniently and at a fraction of the cost.

This is particularly challenging for marketers as 'better and cheaper' is not only possible, it's become the expectation of clients and customers everywhere. If you're not aiming to be better and see how you get on with the alternative, "We're not as good, but we are more expensive."

*Craig Davis is the founder of Brandkarma and the former CCO of Publicis Mojo, Saatchi & Saatchi Asia and JWT Worldwide. He is on the board of Conscious Capitalism and blogs at [craigdavisnow.com](http://craigdavisnow.com)*

