

*Family Business Online and Offline: Gender Inequalities and Regional Disparities in China**

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Abstract

Family business has been an important economic engine under China's market reform, but little is known about how family business has evolved under the rise of online entrepreneurship, which may help to undermine the related gender gap and regional disparities in entrepreneurial activities or reinforce existing social inequalities. This study examines whether and how online and offline family businesses illustrate different patterns of regional disparities and gender inequalities at the regional level and at the individual level. At the regional level, the distribution of offline family businesses suggests a positive sex ratio effect and a negative education effect. These effects are not significant

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* This study was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 41901140), the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (General Research Fund, CUHK 14609219), and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This research uses data from Chinese Family Database (CFD) of Zhejiang University, and China Household Finance Survey (CHFS) conducted by the Survey and Research Center for China Household Finance at the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics (SWUFE), China.

for the distribution of online family businesses; instead, access to the Internet and technology matters more in the development of online entrepreneurship across different areas. At the individual level, the gender gap and regional effects persist in the baseline model, but the two types of family businesses illustrate different gendered patterns regarding the effects of socioeconomic and demographic factors in separate models. Online family businesses allow people to be less constrained by marital status, health status, and family care burden, which continue to contribute to gender differences in offline businesses. Some other effects, however, become more gendered in online businesses: men have a higher chance of online business involvement based on greater human capital and women are more likely to run online business when living in western areas, which may reflect men's education-facilitated market adventures and women's resilient agency in places of limited opportunities. The mixed patterns reflect how regional disparities, opportunity structures, family dynamics, and gender inequalities interact in complicated ways.

The development of the Internet economy in China has led to fundamental changes in the grassroots organization of economic activities. Along with the rise of online ventures, traditional offline family businesses also face new opportunities and challenges that help to reshuffle and restructure grassroots entrepreneurship. Previous studies have found China's rural family businesses to be developed mainly based on the male-dominated coordination of family resources, in which women often play a subordinate and supportive role.¹ Across localities, a similar dichotomy can be found between regions that are taking the lead in exploring new economic opportunities and those who are left behind. The related social, regional, and gender inequalities may continue to be reshaped in an era of information technology and entrepreneurial innovation.

When family business is reformed by the development of the Internet and technology, it is to be examined whether and how the marginalized groups and left-behind laborers see a chance to mobilize grassroots resources and seize economic opportunities. However, debates remain about to what extent women and disadvantaged groups are prepared to take market risks and embrace entrepreneurial opportunities.² Built on existing studies on gender and technology, especially women's entrepreneurship in a digital era, this study looks closely at how the development of both online and offline family businesses has reduced or reinforced