

Mumpreneurs: A growing entrepreneurial force in Chinese society

March 21 2024, by Lisa Xiong



Credit: AI-generated image

While much ink has been poured over China's economic growth in recent decades, the contributions of Chinese women often receive less

attention. With the pressure of the ["three-child policy"](#), being a mother isn't a mere personal choice, it's a part of national demographic strategy. To navigate their lives, many Chinese mothers are now turning to what has been referred to as "mumpreneurship". A January 2024 search for "妈妈创业" (the term in Chinese) showed 69.9 million results on Baidu, China's primary search engine, compared to just 2.6 million English results on Google.

The term mumpreneur was coined in 1996 by Patricia Cobe and Ellen Parlapiano, two entrepreneurs who caught global attention with a [website](#) and [books](#) on the theme. Unlike [female entrepreneurs](#), mumpreneurs are motivated to achieve work-life harmony by merging the identities of [motherhood and business ownership](#). It's typical to observe the boundaries of two roles blurring.

[Prior research](#) indicates that the mumpreneurs movement has its roots in the United States in the 1990s, and that it saw further growth in France in the 2000s, as the Internet gained strength. The researchers defined it as a "feminized form of non-salaried work, in which independence is considered the ideal way to combine work and family."

Mumpreneurship in China

Our ongoing research focuses on mumpreneurs in Chinese urban areas. We find that most are between the ages of 31 and 45, resourceful, educated and digitally savvy. Chinese women's age at first birth is getting older, [30.36 in Shanghai in 2022](#). According to a [2022 Chinese Female Entrepreneurs Research Report](#), women start their businesses at a young age, 36% before 30, 50% between 31 to 40.

COVID-19 has played a key role in driving the growth of

mumpreneurship. Many parents are stepping back from the corporate life due to the economic downturn in China. Mumpreneurs are most commonly found in urban regions such as Beijing, Shanghai and Great Bay area, notably Shenzhen, where robust support networks and resources exist. Preferred sectors are [children's education](#) and social services, HR consulting, psychotherapy consulting, and beauty-related industries. Businesses typically have small teams of no more than 10. Many of their leaders actively engage and enjoy the popularity on [social media](#) like TikTok and Xiaohongshu. One of our interviewees, DanDan, has pioneered a "[divorced companion mumpreneurial business model](#)" (?????? in Chinese) in education and social-media marketing services that has received significant attention. She and her [business partner](#) have recently been invited to [Super Diva](#), a show spotlighting Chinese mothers from diverse backgrounds.

Contrary to the promise of work-life balance, Chinese mumpreneurs are driven and [relentlessly self-improving](#) and are often sleep-deprived. Support can come from a range of source, including their partner, parents, paid services such as nannies, cleaners and drivers, and sometimes company employees. Office and family space are frequently within walking distance or even overlapping.

As in other Asian countries, K–12 education in China is highly competitive. Chinese mothers are often perceived to face triple expectation from the society, family, and themselves, while Chinese fathers can have more leniency. Our study reveals that when it comes to education, some Chinese mumpreneurs disagree with both [?/?](#) (Ji Wa) [Chicken Blood parenting](#) and traditional laissez-faire motherhood. Instead, they believe in a spiritual maternal role, working to strengthen the emotional and personal construction of their children. Annie, a mumpreneur who works in human resources, remarked:

"I disagree with cramming, stressful, and result-oriented education. It's

essential for me to nurture my son's capacity for happiness. It pains me to witness the prevalence of depression among Chinese children."




While mumpreneurs value motherhood, for them it doesn't consistently rank as the top priority. Instead, there's unanimous agreement on the importance of prioritizing the "me" as an individual, encompassing financial, physical, and mental self-care. Additionally, there's a recurring theme indicating that a woman's awakening process is influenced by her education and the duration of her marriage. As for the role of "wife", it's often optional, and many mumpreneurs are single, divorced or cohabiting with partners to whom they are not married.

A social movement

The [rise of a social movement](#) is primarily facilitated by three key factors: more chances to influence politics, support networks, and shaping public opinion through messages. In China, the government has been making a strategic push to compensate for the country's [demographic challenges](#), which will become increasingly acute in the coming years. The country's "one-child policy" was established in 1980, and it took more than a quarter-century to transit to the "two-child policy", enacted in 2016. Less than five years later, the "three-child policy" came into force in 2021.

The increasing female power in China is another catalyst for the mumpreneurship movement. Since 1949, there has been remarkable progress in the economic, educational, and health status of Chinese women. The changing social perceptions could be sensed in the language used to describe them, from 阿姨 (Auntie) to 爷 (Ye) meaning lord or master, and 女王 (Nu Wang) meaning queen. Women are being progressively liberated from the expectation of a life centered on supporting her family, children, and husband. Women in China are embracing more diverse values and contributing to a more inclusive

society.

The support ecosystem for mumpreneurs has matured. These include the "[@SHE Entrepreneur Plan](#)", which is operated by the China Women's Development Foundation. It has grown increasingly influential over the last 28 years and now covers more than 20 provinces. At the grassroots level, [mumpreneur communities](#) are spreading with the help of social media. Interesting examples include Lamabang.net.com, Babytree.com (a sort of Facebook for parents and kids), ci123.com and    Yan Jiu Sheng (which highlights research on pregnancy).

Given their presence, our study mainly focuses on the mumpreneurs in urban areas. Given that the country's spatial disparity, future research could explore mumpreneurship in rural areas. This may reveal differences in entrepreneurial motivation, motherhood definition, social capital and social networking.

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