

*Literature review*

## **Entrepreneurial Role Models and Entrepreneurship Education: Shaping Entrepreneurial Intentions and Aspirations in China**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Although entrepreneurial intentions have been widely studied, much of the literature is grounded in Western contexts. Comparatively less attention has been given to how local entrepreneurial role models and entrepreneurship education shape entrepreneurial aspiration and intention in China. This study examines how renowned local startups, technology giants, and entrepreneurship education contribute to entrepreneurial aspirations and intentions among young adults in China.

**Methodology:** The study adopts a theoretically informed traditional and narrative review approach. This review integrates insights from Social Learning Theory, the Motivational Theory of Role Modeling, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Self-Determination Theory to interpret how exposure to local entrepreneurial ecosystems shapes attitudes, perceived feasibility, and motivational foundations of entrepreneurial action.

**Results:** The analysis suggests that the visibility and success of Chinese startups increasingly influence entrepreneurial aspirations and perceptions of attainability among younger generations. However, while government initiatives and institutional expansion have strengthened entrepreneurship education, concerns remain regarding coherence, practical alignment, and instructional quality.

**Practical implications:** The findings highlight the importance of improving the quality, coherence, and practical alignment of entrepreneurship education and leveraging visible local role models to foster entrepreneurial intentions and strengthen entrepreneurial motivation among young adults in China.

**Originality:** This paper contributes by addressing the limited attention given to the joint influence of local entrepreneurial role models and entrepreneurship education within the context of China. Further, it advances a contextually grounded conceptual explanation of how locally embedded entrepreneurial role models interact with entrepreneurship education to shape perceived attainability and entrepreneurial intentions.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of inspiration in shaping entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations remains underexplored. Historically, entrepreneurship narratives have been dominated by global tech giants such as Facebook, Google, Apple, and Amazon. However, in recent years, Chinese companies like Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu, ByteDance, DJI, and DiDi have emerged as powerful sources of entrepreneurial inspiration, particularly for young people in China.

China's civilization is over 5,000 years old, making it one of the oldest in the world. Throughout its long history, China has developed a rich traditional culture that still shapes the ideas and actions of its people, particularly in business (Li *et al.*, 2023). The Global Entrepreneurship Index (GEI), developed by the Global Entrepreneurship Development Institute, evaluates the entrepreneurial "ecosystems" of 137 countries using factors like attitudes, abilities, and infrastructure (GED, 2017). In the 2018 GEI rankings, the United States, Switzerland, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia took the top positions. While China did not rank among the top countries, it has been making significant efforts behind the scenes, heavily investing in and fostering its entrepreneurial capacity through various initiatives.

China's *Made in China 2025* policy, introduced in 2015 as a ten-year plan to enhance the nation's innovation capabilities, has sparked debate among international competitors over whether it poses a threat to global trade (McBride & Chatzky, 2019). The policy has inspired and empowered China's focus on high-quality development, encouraging innovation, entrepreneurial behaviors, and entrepreneurship education (Lv *et al.*, 2022).

The population of China in 1976 was reported to be between 935 and 940 million people (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024). This is the same year Apple was founded in the U.S., and as Gansky (2017, p. xi) puts it, it successfully transformed from "educational computing into a multibillion-dollar business". National Bureau of Statistics of China (2024) reports that China's population in 2023 was exceeding 1.4 billion. In 2020, China was recognized as one of the largest digital economies globally, valued just over US\$6 trillion, making it second in size only to that of the United States (Zhang,

2022). In 2023, the country's GDP totaled US\$17.5 trillion (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

Research suggests that urbanization and modernization in China have led to a conflict between traditional cultural values and modern influences, placing considerable stress on individuals—especially young people—who may struggle with feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem (Qu et al., 2023). Conversely, the literature also highlights that digitalisation has provided many in China, including young people and those in rural areas, with opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial ventures (Lu et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2022), offering a counterbalance to the pressures of modernization.

Similar to their peers around the world, Chinese millennials—those born between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s—were raised during the rise of computers and grew up alongside mobile phones and the internet (Chunling, 2021). This constant exposure to digital advancements likely sparked their curiosity about the practices and innovations of Western entrepreneurs, fueled their creativity, and potentially shaped their aspirations, driven by the boundless opportunities the internet offers. Generation Z—born in the mid-1990s through the early 2010s—is also regarded as the leading force shaping the future of society (Shi, 2024). Given their active engagement with the internet and familiarity with innovations and advancements in the entrepreneurial arena, and while the literature has established that "exposure to role models has a positive effect on entrepreneurial intentions" (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021, p.6), it becomes worthwhile to explore whether successful local tech startups specifically inspire young people in China and positively influence their entrepreneurial intentions—an area of research that remains underexplored and warrants further investigation.

While some researchers have studied the influence of motivation on becoming an entrepreneur (Caliendo et al., 2023; de Vries et al., 2020), there is less exploration into how well-established startups and renowned entrepreneurial ventures impact their local communities and young adults in China, particularly in terms of inspiring and encouraging entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors. The literature clearly indicates that "studies on the effects of role models on entrepreneurship have significantly increased in recent years" (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021, p. 2).

This raises the question: *if we consider prominent local startups and tech giants in China as role models, how have they influenced the entrepreneurial aspirations and intentions of young adults in the country?* Further, although research indicates that China is focused

on fostering practical skills, promoting entrepreneurship education, and nurturing an entrepreneurial mindset within universities and vocational institutions (Wang et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024), there is insufficient evidence on whether these efforts have been successful to effectively encourage and inspire aspiring entrepreneurs. Building on this, the broader literature suggests that integrating role models into entrepreneurial education programs can play a key role in fostering entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors (Block et al., 2013).

The methodology used in this paper is narrative review. Reviews are typically recognized as approaches that examine existing literature on a topic to explore research questions, without introducing new data (Gregory & Denniss, 2018). However, they offer an evaluation of what has already been published or presented. While this paper draws on a review of the literature, it adopts a non-systematic approach, offering a critical analysis presented as a comprehensive essay.

Two research questions have been formulated to guide this narrative study and serve as the focal points of this paper. While no primary data were collected, the comprehensive literature review provides a strong foundation for addressing these questions, fostering further discussion, and inspiring future research on this topic:

1. How do renowned local startups function as entrepreneurial role models in shaping entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations among young adults in China?
2. How does entrepreneurship education contribute to the development of entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations in the Chinese context?

The subsequent sections present the literature review, outline the methods, and discuss the findings.

## **2. Literature Review**

Undertaking a literature review is a key step in the research process, allowing researchers to assess the state of the art and identify limitations, gaps, and emerging challenges in the discipline (Carrera-Rivera et al., 2022). As Kraus et al., (2022, p. 2577) note “literature reviews are a critical part of scientific research”. This section provides an exploratory and descriptive review of the literature, followed by a discussion and conclusion aimed at addressing the objective of the paper.

### ***2.1. Local Entrepreneurial Role Models and Entrepreneurial Intention in China***

Oleynick et al. (2014, p.1) defines inspiration as “a motivational state that compels individuals to bring ideas into fruition”. In moments of inspiration, individuals become vividly aware of possibilities beyond everyday concerns, surpassing the limits of ordinary, deliberate thought (Oleynick et al., 2014). Being motivated by positive or negative role models have been studied in education and academic performance (Lockwood et al., 2002), and many studies have explored the association between role models and entrepreneurial intentions (Bosma et al., 2012; Nowiński & Haddoud, 2019).

Entrepreneurship is not defined in a single, universally applicable way. However, the various definitions of entrepreneurship generally point in the same direction. Some scholars such as Gartner and Vesper (1994, p.180) define entrepreneurship as “business entry, whether by startup or acquisition, or within an established organization”. Elia et al. (2020, p.3) provides a more recent definition of entrepreneurship and defines it as the “process of identifying potential business opportunities and exploiting them through the recombination of existing resources or the creation of new ones to develop and commercialize new products and services”. Thus far, entrepreneurship literature has consistently emphasized how the development of open innovation and its increasing global participation have transformed the majority of sectors, with only a few deeply traditional businesses remaining less affected (Elia et al., 2020).

Ozaralli and Rivenburgh (2016) state that intentions are crucial in the decision-making process of starting a new business. They raise the question, "What factors influence intention?" (Ozaralli & Rivenburgh, 2016, p.1). Entrepreneurial intention refers to an individual's conscious decision to pursue starting a new business or venture as a career (Kautonen et al., 2015). While Ozaralli and Rivenburgh conducted a comparison between the U.S. and Turkey, highlighting that factors such as individuals' personality traits, risk-taking propensity, and political conditions in their respective countries influence entrepreneurial intentions, we extend this analysis by exploring how successful local entrepreneurial ventures, as role models, can further inspire and shape entrepreneurial intentions, behavior and mindset, with a focus on the context of China.

A widely recognized framework for understanding the formation of entrepreneurial intention is Theory of Planned Behavior. Ajzen (1991) proposes that intention, as the most proximal predictor of behavior, is shaped by three interrelated components: (1) attitudes toward the behavior, (2) subjective norms, and (3) perceived behavioral control. Within the entrepreneurial context, attitudes refer to the extent to which individuals evaluate starting a business positively or negatively; subjective norms capture perceived social approval or support; and perceived behavioural control reflects the degree to which individuals believe they have the capability and resources required to succeed. When viewed alongside Bandura's (1977) social learning perspective and Morgenroth et al.'s (2015) Motivational Theory of Role Modeling, as discussed earlier, TPB offers a complementary lens. Role models may shape entrepreneurial intentions by influencing attitudes toward entrepreneurship, redefining perceived social norms, and strengthening beliefs about attainability and personal capability. In this way, exposure to successful entrepreneurs does not merely inspire admiration but can influence the cognitive antecedents of entrepreneurial intention, including attitudes and perceived capability (Nowiński & Haddoud, 2019).

Some researchers suggest that the environment can play a role in shaping individuals' mindsets and aspirations (Mukhtar et al., 202). Individuals derive inspiration and motivation from their social environments and the learning experiences they encounter (Rwehumbiza & Hyun, 2024). Historically, the United States has been home to the majority of globally renowned startups, either as their founding location or primary base of operations. For example, Apple was founded in 1976 by Steve Job and Steve Wozniak in the U.S (Sutherland, 2012), Logitech, established in 1982 by a Swiss entrepreneur and two Italians with global ambitions, operated with headquarters in both California and Switzerland from the outset (Oviatt et al., 1995), Google's story began in 1995 at Stanford University, California and was incorporated in 1998 (Google, n.d), eBay was founded by an Iranian-American entrepreneur in California in 1995 (Viegas, 2006) among many other now globally renowned startups that began in 70s, 80s, or 90s in the U.S.

More recently, Chobani was founded in 2005 by a Turkish entrepreneur in New York who turned an abandoned factory into a yogurt powerhouse (Harvard Business Review, 2022). Similarly, the seeds for a significant transformation within the tourism accommodation sector were laid in 2007 where Airbnb was born in the United States (Guttentag, 2013). Some researchers suggest that the United States' entrepreneurial

success is driven by a mix of policy incentives, open immigration, structural factors, and a culture of determination and motivation (Ozaralli & Rivenburgh, 2016).

It is reasonable to argue that the emergence of a growing number of globally recognized and successful startups in the United States was not a mere coincidence. This growth can be attributed to the consistent efforts to provide support, encouragement, and inspiration to entrepreneurs (Ebrahimi, 2025a). An example of such efforts is the Startup America initiative, launched during President Obama's administration (Orange, 2011). The initiative was a key part of the White House's strategy to promote, celebrate, and accelerate high-growth entrepreneurship across the nation, creating an environment conducive to innovation and business success (Kalil & Rand, 2014). What stands out even more, demonstrating the long-term vision and commitment of the U.S. government to support entrepreneurship, is the point made by Kalil and Rand. They highlight that three years into the program, Startup America had established global partnerships, including "UP Global," which aimed to support and train 500,000 entrepreneurs across 1,000 cities over the following three years. What this suggests is that a combination of successful local startups and significant government investment in training and attracting entrepreneurs may contribute to enhancing entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors, an outcome that could be challenging to achieve without such levels of support.

In China, Tencent, well-known for its WeChat app, was founded in 1998 and later became one of the world's largest gaming and technology providers (Coe & Yang, 2021; Chen, 2022), and Jack Ma founded Alibaba in 1999 with the support of 17 friends (Alibaba Group, 2025). By 2020, Alibaba, the e-commerce giant had achieved remarkable global reach, with 960 million active users and an impressive gross merchandise transaction value of US\$1 trillion (Tse & Pun, 2024). Baidu was founded in China in 2000 as a search engine platform (Baidu, 2025), serving an estimated 1.092 billion internet users in China as of December 2023 (China Internet Watch, 2025).

More recently, DJI was founded in 2006 by a young entrepreneur in China and has since become one of the largest global players in drone manufacturing (Liu, 2022). In 2012, ByteDance, now famous for the globally popular TikTok app, was established under the leadership of software developer Zhang Yiming (Perdana & Bharathi, 2023). That same year, Didi Chuxing, a pioneering Chinese startup and leading car-sharing and mobile transportation platform, also recognized as a ride-hailing service (Liu & Kim, 2022), elevated global competition with Uber, its American counterpart, to new horizons (Yuan, 2025). This ongoing growth of successful entrepreneurial ventures in China highlights

the rise of formidable local startups, capable of inspiring entrepreneurial intentions, motivation, behavior, and mindset in China's current era of the sharing economy.

China's eCommerce sector has been led by major players and startups like Tmall, Taobao, and JD since 1998, with another local startup, Pinduoduo, making a notable impact since its establishment in 2015. In just three years, Pinduoduo amassed 400 million users, positioning itself as one of the most prominent platforms, particularly within the traditional agriculture industry (Zhao et al., 2019). In China, even rural entrepreneurship—a domain once largely overlooked—is now making remarkable strides, driven by advancements in rural digitalization (Lu et al., 2024). This shift is significant, as research such as Ma et al.'s (2022) study illustrates changing patterns of rural entrepreneurial activity in China. Based on data collected from 525 new-generation rural migrant entrepreneurs, the study provides insights into the factors associated with rural entrepreneurial success. The findings indicate that rural entrepreneurs' social capital consists of five dimensions, with reputation playing a central role, while psychological capital includes innovation and risk-taking, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial happiness. The presence of these social and psychological resources may reshape perceptions of entrepreneurship within Chinese communities and encourage entrepreneurial aspirations that may previously have remained unrealised.

Tse and Li (2023) highlight that “The legendary commercial successes of Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent have not only created economic prosperity, but also motivated tens of thousands to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams” (p. 1548). While Tse and Li point to the role these three brands—once humble startups and now globally renowned—play in inspiring individuals to pursue entrepreneurial ambitions, it is reasonable to suggest that as successful entrepreneurial ventures in China continue to expand and entrepreneurship education gains prominence, entrepreneurial intentions, mindsets, and aspirations among Chinese Millennials and Generation Z may become increasingly reinforced. Raised in the age of the internet and digitalization, these cohorts are particularly positioned to identify with and internalize local entrepreneurial success stories.

Based on the literature examined in this review, no empirical studies were identified that directly investigated the role of renowned Chinese startups as symbolic role models shaping the entrepreneurial aspirations and intentions of Millennials and Generation Z in China. However, broader empirical research within Chinese university populations demonstrates that entrepreneurial intention is strongly associated with subjective norms, entrepreneurial attitudes, and self-efficacy (Peng et al., 2012). These findings are relevant

since they identify the psychological pathways through which entrepreneurial intention is formed, consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). If prominent local startups function as symbolic role models, their influence would likely operate through these mechanisms — by shaping attitudes toward entrepreneurship, influencing perceived social norms, and strengthening beliefs about personal capability — processes that align with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Motivational Theory of Role Modeling (Morgenroth et al., 2015).

While the literature is still growing on the power of local startups to influence entrepreneurial intentions, behavior, and passion of others within their locality, the power of influence in terms of influential entrepreneurs as role models have been researched and it has been reported that influential entrepreneurs have the power to encourage others to believe in themselves and to ignite passion for personal success (Guiñez-Cabrera & Aqueveque, 2022). A longitudinal study by Jin et al. (2023) which distributed survey among 519 students from 16 colleges and universities in China to explore the relationship between entrepreneurial role models, entrepreneurial calling, entrepreneurial perceived behavioral control and entrepreneurial hands-on practice found that entrepreneurial role models positively associate with college students' entrepreneurial calling, which researchers described as rising meaningful passion for entrepreneurship. According to social learning theory, individuals' observations and perceptions of role models' behaviors or mindsets, reinforced by positive outcomes, can lead to the expectation that adopting similar behaviors or mindsets will produce the same positive results (Bandura, 1977).

Whereas Bandura's (1977) social learning theory explains how behaviors are acquired through observation, Morgenroth et al.'s (2015) Motivational Theory of Role Modeling illuminates the motivational dynamics that determine whether such observations translate into aspiration. By foregrounding expectancy–value processes, Motivational Theory of Role Modeling clarifies how exposure to role models shapes goal formation and perceived attainability, influencing not only what individuals admire but what they judge to be realistically achievable. In this sense, role models do more than invite imitation; they recalibrate beliefs about feasibility and personal alignment, processes that are central to the formation of both entrepreneurial aspirations and intentions among university students.

Two key points are important to consider here. First, according to Bandura (1977), people acquire knowledge not only through direct experience but also by observing others within their social environment, a process known as 'modeling.' Second, this concept aligns with

Cote's (2022) insights from Harvard Business School, which emphasize the importance of learning from the stories of successful entrepreneurs. The literature further supports this by highlighting how local success stories and role models provide valuable opportunities for both learning and motivation. For instance, the story of Adolf "Adi" Dassler, the founder of Adidas, who began his shoemaking career in an old laundry shed at the back of the Dassler family home in a small German town (Walters, 2020), serves as a powerful source of inspiration for aspiring entrepreneurs in Germany and beyond. Similarly, for Chinese millennials and Gen Z, the remarkable success of local startups—now globally recognized and respected—could potentially act as a significant catalyst for entrepreneurial inspirations.

The success of well-known local tech startups and prominent entrepreneurs in China may inspire the entrepreneurial aspirations of young adults in the country. However, as the literature suggests, this could also contribute to overconfidence and the creation of unrealistic expectations. Cieřlik et al. (2023) highlight that such inflated ambitions can lead to significant risks for solo entrepreneurs, including potential business failure. Similarly, broader systemic challenges may also shape entrepreneurial outcomes. For instance, in 2017, the State Library of Queensland observed that Chinese authorities were notably open to business model innovation, often allowing emerging companies to scale with minimal regulatory oversight (State Library of Queensland, 2017). Yet, this supportive environment shifted significantly in 2020, as Collier (2022) noted a crackdown on large technology firms. These regulatory changes, while aimed at addressing broader economic concerns, may inadvertently limit innovation and deter aspiring entrepreneurs. Exploring how these evolving policies impact entrepreneurial psychology and ambition warrants further investigation.

## ***2.2. Entrepreneurship Education and Entrepreneurial Aspirations in China***

Research indicates that entrepreneurship education gained significant popularity in the United States during the 1980s. By 2001, more than 1,500 universities and colleges in the United States were offering entrepreneurship education as part of their baccalaureate programs (Yu, 2018). In contrast, entrepreneurship education is a relatively recent concept in many Chinese universities (Nabi et al., 2017). It wasn't until early 2000s that The China Ministry of Education started pilot programs for entrepreneurship education at nine universities (Liu et al., 2014). The development of entrepreneur education in China has a shorter history, beginning in the late 1980s and influenced by UNESCO's 1989

Beijing Conference, as well as the collaborative efforts of UNESCO and the International Labour Office in shaping early entrepreneurship education initiatives in China (Li et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024).

As stated above, over two decades have passed since 2002, when the Chinese government recognized entrepreneurship programs (EP) in educational institutions, particularly universities and vocational colleges, as a key mechanism for promoting economic and social transformation (Zhou et al., 2024). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Report of China in 2011 indicated that less than 1% of Chinese graduates pursue entrepreneurship (Liu et al., 2014). However, in 2017, estimates of actual entrepreneurial activity after graduation remain inconsistent, ranging from under 1% to nearly 3%, depending on the sample used and the definitions of key terms such as entrepreneurship, graduate, and time frame (You et al., 2017). This is still a fairly slow and poor progression when compared to some other western countries such as the United States, Australia, and the UK.

Chinese and American entrepreneurship education differ significantly in areas such as curriculum design, faculty composition, and entrepreneurship competitions. In the United States, the 1990s saw the emergence of specialized entrepreneurship educators, along with a growing integration of teaching and research (Solomon & Fernald, 1991). By the 2000s, educators with entrepreneurial experience became prominent, and teaching increasingly incorporated insights from research (Fiet, 2001; Hägg & Gabrielsson, 2020). The emphasis on curriculum design, faculty composition, and entrepreneurship competitions, coupled with the involvement of educators with entrepreneurial experience and the integration of research and case studies, likely played a crucial role in fostering entrepreneurial intentions and driving the growing popularity of entrepreneurship in the United States. The question, then, is how has entrepreneurship education inspired entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations in China?

Li et al. (2023) conducted a study in China to explore the relationship between entrepreneurial education, creativity, and intentions among university students. The research highlights how fostering entrepreneurial creativity has become increasingly valued as a way to enhance students' ability to innovate. By surveying 448 business students from three provinces—Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang—the study found that entrepreneurial education and creativity positively influence entrepreneurial intentions. Additionally, factors such as entrepreneurial inspiration, mindset, and self-efficacy were identified as partial mediators in this relationship, underscoring the importance of psychological and motivational elements in shaping entrepreneurial behaviors. Li et al.'s

work cited here, based on a substantial sample from three diverse Chinese universities, offers robust evidence of the significant role entrepreneurship education plays in fostering and empowering entrepreneurial intentions. Furthermore, their insights underscore the correlation between enhanced creativity and entrepreneurship education.

Li et al.'s (2023) findings can also be interpreted through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan (1985) argue that persistent motivation is more likely when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Entrepreneurship education that strengthens creativity and self-efficacy may enhance students' sense of competence, while exposure to inspiring entrepreneurial pathways can foster autonomy in career choice. Supporting these core psychological needs positions entrepreneurship education as more than a skills-based intervention; it becomes a catalyst for both entrepreneurial intention and enduring intrinsic motivation.

Reports and research findings in the literature point to two important areas. One, the growing and promising number of institutions and training providers that provide entrepreneurship education supported by Chinese government's encouragement, policies and initiatives. Second, quality and practical outcome of entrepreneurship education is being questioned. For example, Dai et al. (2019) highlight that in China, colleges and universities follow a national framework aimed at fostering students' innovative abilities. However, as Lv et al. (2022) point out, while national policies strongly encourage technical universities to integrate innovation and entrepreneurship into their curricula to meet industry demands, some university staff feel that these institutions lack the capability and experience to effectively guide students in education for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Supporting what Lv et al. (2022) have previously discussed, Zhou et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review and conducted a thematic analysis on 46 articles published between 2003 and 2023, and found that despite Chinese government initiatives to enhance entrepreneurship education through policy reforms and industry-academia partnerships, the curricula often lack coherence and alignment with real-world demands and didn't up-skill and prepare students for confidently embarking on entrepreneurial journeys. The study emphasizes the need for integrating practical experiences, developing competent educators, and fostering innovation-driven teaching methods to create a robust framework that can better equip students with entrepreneurial competencies essential for China's evolving economic landscape. The literature appears to present a situation where, on one hand, the Chinese government is promoting creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship

education in higher education institutions to foster a dynamic entrepreneurial economy (Mei & Symaco, 2020), while, on the other hand, reports indicate that the quality of entrepreneurship education and its real-world impact are deemed insufficient.

For a broader comparison, it is useful to explore Dodescu and Coșuț's (2018) study, conducted in Romania, highlights that women tend to show less inclination towards entrepreneurship compared to men, and young individuals face significant challenges in securing financing. Interview data from the study revealed that for 58.33% of the entrepreneurs interviewed, education in business was the second most important factor motivating them to undertake entrepreneurial activities and establish a business. However, despite this positive finding, 33.33% of respondents reported that their business education, lacking a specialisation in entrepreneurship, did not adequately prepare them for entrepreneurial pursuits. Furthermore, they felt their school provided insufficient support for their entrepreneurial development. Although the study involved a relatively small sample size, with interviews conducted with only 12 young entrepreneurs, it raises one important question. Does business education without a specialisation in entrepreneurship effectively develop aspiring entrepreneurs and inspire entrepreneurial intentions?

The relationship between entrepreneurship education, inspiring success narratives, and relatable role models remains central to understanding how entrepreneurial intentions are formed. Early empirical work by Henderson and Robertson (1999) demonstrated that although young adults in the UK viewed entrepreneurship positively, aspirations were constrained by the absence of relatable role models and insufficient encouragement from educational and social influencers. In the Chinese context, scholarship examining entrepreneurial intention has expanded considerably over the past two decades, particularly in relation to psychological predictors and educational interventions. However, the specific symbolic role of prominent local startups as visible, culturally embedded role models shaping entrepreneurial aspiration among Millennials and Generation Z remains comparatively underexplored. As China's entrepreneurial ecosystem continues to mature, further conceptual and empirical attention to this intersection remains necessary.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a narrative review approach, drawing on established guidance for conducting rigorous non-systematic reviews (Gregory & Denniss, 2018). The objective was to synthesize existing empirical, theoretical, and policy-oriented literature examining the influence of local entrepreneurial role models and entrepreneurship education on entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations in China.

A structured literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Scopus, EBSCO, and ScienceDirect. Search terms were applied using advanced database search functions, combining keywords with Boolean operators (AND, OR) and phrase searching to increase precision. Examples of search strings included: (“entrepreneurial inspiration” AND China), (“entrepreneurial intention” AND China), (“local startups” AND China), (“entrepreneurship education” AND China), (“entrepreneurial role models” AND China), (“Gen Z” AND entrepreneurship AND China), and (“motivation” AND entrepreneurship AND students AND China). Searches were conducted within titles, abstracts, and keywords where possible. The search focused on peer-reviewed publications in English and prioritized studies published between 2000–2025, while also incorporating seminal foundational works where relevant (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Ajzen, 1991). Given that a substantial proportion of academic publications are available in English, with estimates suggesting that approximately 75% to 98% of scientific publications are published in English (Bahji et al., 2022; Ramírez-Castañeda, 2020), and given that the author does not read or write Chinese, this review was limited to English-language sources. While this potential limitation is acknowledged in this paper, it still provides a sufficiently robust and representative evidence base for addressing the research objectives of this study.

Table 1 presents an overview of the key studies informing this narrative review, including their context, methodological orientation, principal findings, and relevance to the research questions. The provided table enhances transparency of the evidence base underpinning the analysis in the present paper. Given the narrative nature of the study and the breadth of literature cited, the table includes studies that contributed substantively to the review, rather than providing an exhaustive listing of all references.

Studies were selected based on their conceptual relevance to the research questions, empirical rigor, and explicit engagement with either the Chinese context or comparative international perspectives that provided analytical insight. Both qualitative and

quantitative studies were considered where they contributed to understanding the relationship between role models, education, and entrepreneurial intention formation.

An inductive thematic analysis was undertaken following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach facilitated the identification of recurring conceptual patterns and relationships within the literature. The analytical process involved:

1. Familiarization: Engaging thoroughly with the literature to recognize recurrent topics and ideas.
2. Coding and Theme Identification: Noting descriptive labels for prominent concepts and grouping similar ideas into broader themes.
3. Refinement: Iteratively comparing and discussing emerging themes to ensure they accurately captured the nuances of the literature.

To enhance transparency and analytical rigor, the search strategy, selection criteria, and theme development procedures are clearly outlined.

*Table 1. Key studies underpinning the synthesis*

Author(s) / Year	Context / sample	Focus	Method	Main finding	Relevance to RQ1 / RQ2
Abbasianchavari and Moritz (2021)	Entrepreneurship literature review	Effects of role models on entrepreneurial intentions and behavior	Literature review	Studies on role models and entrepreneurship have increased, and exposure to role models has a positive effect on entrepreneurial intentions	RQ1. Foundational support that role models matter for entrepreneurial intention
Block et al. (2013)	10,000 individuals from 27 European countries and the USA	Integration of role models into entrepreneurship education programs	Empirical work; Instrumental variables approach using a large cross-country dataset	Integrating role models into entrepreneurial education programs can help foster entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors	RQ1 and RQ2. Links role models and entrepreneurship education
Peng et al. (2012)	Chinese university students in Xi'an, China; a survey of 2,010 students	A multi-factor analysis of entrepreneurial intentions	Empirical research; Survey-based study using structural equation modelling	Entrepreneurial intention is strongly associated with subjective norms, entrepreneurial attitudes, and self-efficacy	RQ1. Supports the mechanisms through which local startups may influence intention via TPB-related pathways
Jin et al. (2023)	519 students from 16 colleges and universities in China	Entrepreneurial role models, entrepreneurial calling, perceived behavioral control, and hands-on practice	Longitudinal survey with hierarchical regression and moderated mediation analysis	Role models increased entrepreneurial calling via perceived control, strengthened further by hands-on practice	RQ1. Strong China-based support for the importance of entrepreneurial role models
Guiñez-Cabrera and Aqueveque (2022)	35 semi-structured face-to-face interviews	Influential entrepreneurs as role models & digital entrepreneurs	Empirical research; adopting phenomenological perspective	Influential entrepreneurs have the power to encourage others to believe in themselves and ignite passion for personal success	RQ1. Supports the motivational role of entrepreneurial figures
Henderson and Robertson (1999)	138 undergraduate students as survey participants in the UK	Entrepreneurship as a career and the role of relatable role models	Empirical work; quantitative, questionnaire surveys of young adults	Young adults viewed entrepreneurship positively, but aspirations were constrained by the absence of relatable role models and insufficient encouragement from educational and social influencers	RQ1 and indirect RQ2. Supports the value of role models and educational/social encouragement

Author(s) / Year	Context / sample	Focus	Method	Main finding	Relevance to RQ1 / RQ2
Li et al. (2023)	448 business students from three provinces in China: Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang	Relationship between entrepreneurship education, creativity, and entrepreneurial intentions	Survey-based empirical study	Entrepreneurial education and creativity positively influence entrepreneurial intentions; entrepreneurial inspiration, mindset, and self-efficacy partially mediate this relationship	RQ2. Direct support for the contribution of entrepreneurship education to intention and aspiration in China
Lv et al. (2022)	Chinese technical universities; 3554 participants across surveys and interviews	Improving innovation and entrepreneurship education through university-industry integration.	Empirical, Mixed Methods Research	Chinese technical universities need stronger industry integration, curricular reform, incubation platforms, and coordinated ecosystems to improve entrepreneurship education	RQ2. Supports concerns about instructional quality, real-world relevance, industry integration, and institutional readiness
Zhou et al. (2024)	46 articles published between 2003 and 2023 on Chinese higher institutions and vocational colleges	Challenges and strategies in entrepreneurship education in Chinese higher institutions	Systematic review with thematic analysis	Despite policy reforms and industry-academia partnerships, curricula often lack coherence and alignment with real-world demands and do not sufficiently prepare students for entrepreneurial journeys	RQ2. Strong evidence base for limits in the quality and practical alignment of entrepreneurship education in China
Mei and Symaco (2020)	China's higher education institutions with special reference to Zhejiang province	University-wide entrepreneurship education issues and challenges	Interpretive qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and document analysis	University-wide entrepreneurship education faces legitimacy issues, limited expertise, weak collaboration, and misaligned, unsustainable program models	RQ2. Supports the critical side of the argument about structural weakness in entrepreneurship education
Wang et al. (2024)	Chinese and US entrepreneurship education stakeholders across Zhejiang universities	Comparing Chinese and American entrepreneurship education through a Chinese perspective	Empirical; Qualitative interviews, comparative analysis	Chinese EE diverges from US model due to political, cultural, and institutional differences; Government-led focus on skills, not startups	RQ2. Supports the policy, governance, and educational emphasis in China
You et al. (2017)	National survey of directors of career services in Chinese higher education institutions	Student entrepreneurship and institutional support in Chinese universities	Quantitative cross-sectional survey	High entrepreneurial interest, but low participation, low survival, low success after graduation, and uneven institutional support across universities	RQ2. Helps question whether entrepreneurship education is translating into entrepreneurial activity

Author(s) / Year	Context / sample	Focus	Method	Main finding	Relevance to RQ1 / RQ2
Dai et al. (2019)	Chinese colleges and universities within a national framework	National framework for fostering students' innovative abilities	Empirical; Delphi study	Chinese colleges and universities follow a national framework aimed at fostering innovative ability	RQ2. Supports the policy environment around innovation and entrepreneurship education
Dodescu and Coșuț (2018)	12 young entrepreneurs in Bihor County, Romania	Youth entrepreneurship, education, and role models at local level	Interview-based qualitative study	For 58.33% of interviewees, business education was the second most important factor motivating entrepreneurial activity, but 33.33% felt their business education did not adequately prepare them	RQ2, with indirect relevance to RQ1. Supports the distinction between education exposure and actual preparedness
Ma et al. (2022)	525 new-generation rural migrant entrepreneurs in China	Rural entrepreneurship, social capital, and psychological capital	Quantitative survey, factor analysis, and multiple linear regression modelling	Rural entrepreneurs' social capital includes five dimensions with reputation as pivotal; psychological capital includes innovation and risk-taking, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurial happiness	RQ1, Supports the broader claim that entrepreneurial ecosystems in China are evolving and may activate aspiration
Mukhtar et al. (2021)	376 university students in entrepreneurship courses, Indonesia	Education, culture, mindset shaping students' entrepreneurial intention	Quantitative survey using SEM-PLS structural equation modeling approach	Mindset and culture increased intention; education influenced mindset but not intention directly	RQ1 and RQ2 at a conceptual level
Nowiński and Haddoud (2019)	423 university students in Polish higher education institutions	Role models, attitudes, self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intention	Survey study using fsQCA and PLS-SEM validation analysis	Role models, positive attitudes, and self-efficacy combinations most strongly increased students' entrepreneurial intentions	RQ1. Supports the use of TPB plus role model theory

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The literature revealed that during the 70s, 80s, and 90s, numerous U.S. startups, which are now globally recognized giants, benefited from various forms of incentives, policies, initiatives, and support. This, combined with a robust entrepreneurial mindset and progressive enthusiasm to engage in entrepreneurship, led to a wave of entrepreneurs pursuing their own entrepreneurial goals and dreams. In contrast, China, which began focusing on entrepreneurship, innovation, and entrepreneurship education later, saw its own successful entrepreneurs and startups emerge in the 2000s as influential role models, inspiring local aspirations.

More specifically, the literature reviewed in this paper suggests that, within the Chinese context, the growing visibility of successful Chinese startups and technology ventures has likely contributed to strengthening entrepreneurial aspiration by making entrepreneurial success appear more culturally relevant and attainable to younger generations. At the same time, the literature indicates that entrepreneurship education in China has expanded significantly through policy support and institutional adoption, and several studies report positive associations between entrepreneurship education, creativity, self-efficacy, inspiration, and entrepreneurial intention. However, the review also reveals an important limitation. While the symbolic and motivational influence of prominent Chinese startups appears conceptually significant, direct empirical evidence examining how these locally embedded ventures function as role models in shaping entrepreneurial intentions among Chinese Millennials and Generation Z remains limited. Similarly, although entrepreneurship education is widely promoted, concerns persist regarding curricular coherence, instructional quality, and practical alignment with real entrepreneurial demands.

While prior research has examined entrepreneurial intention through established frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Learning Theory, this review advances the literature by integrating these perspectives within a contextually embedded model of entrepreneurial inspiration. Specifically, the analysis suggests that locally visible entrepreneurial success functions not merely as motivational exposure but as a mechanism that recalibrates perceived attainability through cultural proximity and ecosystem visibility. This shifts the role of entrepreneurial role models from symbolic inspiration to cognitive legitimisation of entrepreneurial pathways.

The present article proposes that the continuous and increasing presence of local entrepreneurial role models, coupled with successful startups and a growing emphasis on entrepreneurship education, plays a pivotal role in fostering entrepreneurial spirit among young adults in China. This interpretation aligns with the Motivational Theory of Role Modeling (Morgenroth et al., 2015), which suggests that visible local success stories can recalibrate perceived attainability and strengthen the expectancy–value foundations underlying entrepreneurial aspiration and intention. In this way, exposure to credible and relatable role models may move beyond inspiration alone, shaping beliefs about feasibility and personal alignment. This perspective is supported by the literature review and prior empirical findings highlighting key mechanisms in entrepreneurial development. Research suggests that “entrepreneurial mindset can be reached through learning” (Passaro et al., 2018, p. 139). Furthermore, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2002) indicate that strengthening self-efficacy, perceived behavioral control, and supportive social norms can reinforce entrepreneurial intention formation, particularly within environments characterized by policy support and visible local role models.

Earlier in this paper, Zhou et al.'s (2024) systematic review and thematic analysis of 46 articles published between 2003 and 2023 highlighted the value of the Chinese government's initiatives to enhance entrepreneurship education through policy reforms and industry-academia partnerships. However, their findings, along with those from other studies, suggest that further efforts are needed to strengthen the quality and real-world applicability of learning content. From a Self-Determination Theory perspective (Ryan and Deci, 2000), entrepreneurship education that lacks coherence and practical integration may constrain students' development of competence and autonomy, thereby limiting the intrinsic motivation necessary for ongoing entrepreneurial engagement. The findings of a review of entrepreneurship literature by Ebrahimi (2025b) further support this argument and highlight that engaging in ongoing learning activities, leveraging intrinsic motivation, and connecting to support networks enhance entrepreneurs' ability to achieve success in the face of challenges. Educators, as support networks, with prior entrepreneurial experience, may be particularly well positioned to integrate research insights with practical application, strengthening the relevance and motivational impact of entrepreneurship education. Furthermore, while the literature confirms that “entrepreneurial education has a direct and significant positive effect on entrepreneurial

inspiration” (Li et al., 2023, p. 8), the present paper suggests that this effect is contingent upon instructional coherence, curriculum quality, and experiential depth. Enhancing the overall student learning experience may therefore reinforce the translation of inspiration into entrepreneurial intention by strengthening students’ perceived competence and self-efficacy.

Examining how successful local startups and renowned entrepreneurial ventures, supported by entrepreneurship education and a progressively growing entrepreneurial mindset, inspire and empower entrepreneurship within a nation is a highly intricate task. It is far too complex to be comprehensively captured in a single article, book, or chapter due to the multitude of factors and dynamics at play. Hambrick and Mason (1984) proposed in the upper echelon theory that due to the complexity of both internal and external business environments, entrepreneurs cannot have a comprehensive understanding of all its aspects. Entrepreneurship is a complex, multifaceted endeavor, and aspiring entrepreneurs need more than a mere desire to start ventures and adopt entrepreneurial behavior.

As Dhingra (2020) questions *why entrepreneurship is so difficult*, the present literature review suggests that while entrepreneurship is complex, and encouraging entrepreneurial mindset and intentions is not a straightforward process, it can be influenced through targeted strategies. While, offering incentives and policies to encourage entrepreneurship is proven to be effective, leveraging successful local startups as role models, and providing quality entrepreneurship education that nurtures entrepreneurial behaviors, skills, and creativity through well-designed curricula and experienced educators can inspire young people, and potentially improve entrepreneurial intentions.

On one hand, the absence of identifiable role models is often cited as a significant factor that hinders entrepreneurial aspirations and ambitions (Henderson & Robertson, 1999). On the other hand, observing individuals within one's social environment can serve as a powerful source of inspiration, fostering both learning and personal growth (Bandura, 1977). I found evidence suggesting that entrepreneurial aspirations and motivation to start one’s own business are on the rise in China, especially among university students. While I couldn’t establish direct evidence on the influence of China’s growing successful giant startups since 2000s, the literature hinted that social and business influences can play an important role in entrepreneurial inspirations. The literature suggested that when questioned about their motivation for starting a business, entrepreneurs frequently attribute their decision to the influence of "others” and these influential figures often

include a diverse range of individuals, such as well-known personalities and other entrepreneurs (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021). These “others” who are can also be considered as role models (BarNir et al., 2011) when observed by aspiring entrepreneurs can play an important role in shaping entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors of them (Krueger et al. 2000; Kuratko *et al.* 1997; Scherer et al. 1989a; Carroll & Mosakowski 1987; Scott & Twomey 1988; Bandura 1982).

## **5. Conclusion**

The present review concludes that the increasing visibility of successful local startups in China, together with government-supported reforms and the expansion of entrepreneurship education, is contributing to the development of entrepreneurial intentions, aspirations, and mindset among young adults. The growing visibility of successful local startups together with the expansion of entrepreneurship education may strengthen young people’s confidence in venture creation and their perceived attainability of entrepreneurial careers. While the literature points to growing government investment and rising interest in entrepreneurship, empirical research directly examining the influence of renowned local startups as role models remains limited. Nonetheless, the continued growth of startups, including in rural regions, alongside the institutional expansion of entrepreneurship education, suggests an evolving entrepreneurial movement in China. At the same time, concerns regarding the coherence, quality, and practical alignment of entrepreneurship education suggest that further improvement in curriculum design and instructional practice remains necessary.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

The contribution of this review lies not in introducing new theory but in demonstrating how existing theories interact differently within rapidly developing entrepreneurial ecosystems where local success visibility alters perceived feasibility thresholds. This study’s focus on China may limit its applicability to other cultural or national contexts, and the narrative, nonsystematic design may introduce selective interpretation despite efforts to ensure transparency. Further, the author acknowledged that while systematic reviews are particularly suited to narrowly defined research questions (Sukhera, 2022), narrative reviews are well positioned to integrate diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives across broader domains (Baethge et al., 2019). Future research may

incorporate literature published in Chinese alongside peer-reviewed publications in English. Future research could also adopt mixed-methods designs to empirically examine how variations in entrepreneurship education quality, in parallel with exposure to local entrepreneurial role models, jointly shape entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations among young adults in China.

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