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**Experiencing International Assignment:
An Exploratory Study of
Chinese International Assignees**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Human Resource Management
at
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Abstract

International Assignment is at the centre of this study. Drawing on data from interviews with 31 Chinese assignees working for multinational companies in different cultural contexts, it explores their perceptions of international experience.

Most literature concerning international assignments focuses on assignees from Western countries. By comparison, assignees from emerging economies such as China remain an under-researched group despite a rapid growth of multinational companies from these newly emerging economies. Moreover, much of the research often takes a unilateral perspective (such as either motivation, experience or career) lacking theoretical integration and failing to investigate the complexity of international assignments. Hence, to address this gap, this study adopts an integrated, multi-dimensional theoretical framework incorporating motivation, experience and career capital. It uses a qualitative research methodology based on in-depth interviews and is located within an interpretive paradigm in which individual meaning, action, social relationships and interactions are paramount.

The study begins by focusing on motivation for accepting an international assignment. Motivation is identified as a multi-faceted, complex and interdependent decision-making process. Building career capital, which leads to personal growth, is the ultimate individual expectation from a foreign posting. International experience is then explored, focusing on issues associated with adjustment, satisfaction and social integration. While some initial expectations are fulfilled, other factors become more relevant over time and affect individual perceptions of the value of international assignments. This emphasises the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of the overseas experience. Specific attention is also given to the career capital development of international assignees. The findings offer new insights to the international assignment literature showing that while Chinese assignees appreciate the experience of international assignments, in contrast to much of the Western literature, they consider it has little impact on their future careers. This is explained largely in terms of cultural factors (generally the relevance to Chinese career development), as well as the particular nature of Chinese multinational companies. In the last part, the concept of career capital is examined integrating findings on motivation and experience. Taking an overall perspective, the context of assignees' career capital development is analysed focusing on the relevance of factors within individual, organisational and social domains. Two new themes, knowing-when and knowing-where, are also added to the existing understanding of three ways of knowing.

The contribution of this study is thus both theoretical and empirical. It extends the knowledge of motivation, experience and career capital, utilising an under-researched, yet increasingly important, sample of Chinese assignees working for multinational companies in Western countries. The proposed contextual model provides implications

for future research such as comparative studies of international assignees from different cultures or assignees on different types of postings (e.g., long-term, short-term and frequent flyer). Future investigations could also focus on the specifications of contextual factors for international assignments and career development of international assignees.

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List of Related Publications

Refereed Journal Articles

Yao, C. (2013). The impact of cultural dimensions on Chinese expatriates' career capital. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2013.792862.

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Book Chapter

Thorn, K. and Yao, C. (2013), Careers, employment relations and HRM in New Zealand (book chapter), in Parker, J. and Arrowsmith, J: *The Big Issues in Employment: HR management and employment relations in New Zealand*. Auckland: CCH New Zealand Ltd.

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Note: Statement of Contribution is attached (Appendix A)

Chapter One

Introduction

Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small. A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.

-- Lao Tzu

This study explores the perceptions of Chinese employees posted abroad. Analysis hinges on the notion of ‘career capital’ (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). This chapter introduces the research topic and defines its direction and scope. First, the setting of the study is provided including the rationale for conducting the research and the relevance of Chinese multinational companies (MNCs). Discussions then move to the theoretical context of the research outlining the research question and the need for an integrated theoretical approach. Methodological choices are defined and research contributions are explained. The researcher’s experience in shaping this study is also provided at the end of this chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

MNCs routinely utilise international assignments (IAs) as part of their global coordination and control strategies (Briscoe & Schuler, 2004; Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2009) and IAs have become an essential part of MNCs’ strategic human resources management practices, linked closely to the company’s core competitive strategy (Evans, Pucik, & Barsoux, 2002). In an increasingly globalised world, they are

also an effective approach for developing managers with much-needed cross-national and cross-cultural competencies (De Cieri, 2005). Yet, despite the importance and popularity of IAs, organisations often struggle to maximise their effectiveness. Research indicates that there are inconsistencies between the organisation's expectation of IAs and the actual outcome (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007; Evans et al., 2002; Shay & Baack, 2004). Adjustment difficulties (Kim & Slocum, 2008), high financial costs (Bolino, 2007), and repatriation turnover (Stahl, Chua, Caligiuri, Cerdin, & Taniguchi, 2009) are major factors associated with IA failure.

To investigate these factors, much research examines the effectiveness of IAs focusing on the impacts of IAs on organisational performance; however, another important stream of the literature is the individual perspective. This explores the extent to which IAs are utilised for developing individual competencies (Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Makela & Suutari, 2007) and future career advancement (Kraimer, Shaffer, & Bolino, 2009). This research stream is important because poorly managed IAs are likely to be costly and lead to dysfunctional outcomes for organisations.

International assignees may be motivated to accept an IA for several reasons. The financial packages are often attractive compared to domestic work because they often include housing allowances, children's education and assistance finding jobs for partners in the foreign country, in addition to higher remuneration to induce or compensate for the inconvenience of moving (Stahl & Cerdin, 2004). IAs also provide opportunities to experience different cultures and life-styles. However, cultural and

personal issues such as language difficulties, family dislocation and 'homesickness' can be significant drawbacks that, in many cases, contribute to expatriation failure (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009). Regardless of these difficulties, international assignees often acknowledge and appreciate the value of IAs for the opportunities to develop new knowledge, improve managerial skills and enhance their networks, and therefore increase their competencies for career success (Jokinen et al., 2008).

The development of such career competencies, referred to as *career capital*, has become a mainstream consideration within the academic career literature (Dickmann & Harris, 2005). However, the concept has not been sufficiently well developed or applied in relation to IAs (Dickmann & Doherty, 2007). Career capital refers to the accumulation of skills, knowledge, contacts and perceptions from an individual's career experiences (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). There are three key factors limiting the advancement of knowledge with respect to IAs, and Chinese IAs in particular. First, while researchers endeavour to discover the impact of IAs on individual career development, there is no agreement on how assignees themselves perceive the likely outcomes of IAs. Much of the focus is on the motivations for initially accepting an IA, but how these drivers link to subsequent international experiences and the development of perceived career competencies, and ultimately career outcomes, remain unclear.

Second, current literature focuses heavily on the effectiveness of IAs of managers from developed countries such as the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Japan. To date, relatively little research has sought to understand the impact of

IAs on individuals in MNCs from developing countries, such as China. This is despite the increasing significance of Chinese companies abroad. For example, Chinese enterprise foreign direct investment (excluding financial trade) totalled US\$55.9 billion in 2008, and has increased at a rate of 30% per annum for the last five years (Ministry of Commerce, 2009). China is emerging as one of the top foreign direct investment exporters among developing countries (Cooke, 2008).

Like their Western counterparts, Chinese MNCs utilise IAs to fulfill international tasks, develop competent global workers and, ultimately, achieve organisational goals (Shen, 2006). However, because of the cultural and business differences between China and other countries, particularly those in 'the West', it is reasonable to anticipate different needs and expectations from both organisational and individual perspectives. The focus of this research is therefore to make a contribution to extant knowledge and conceptualisation of IAs by studying the experiences and perceptions of assignees from Chinese MNCs.

1.2 Research Objective and Question

The main objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of IAs from an individual perspective utilising the theoretical construct of career capital but also drawing on the international human resource management literature relating to the management of IAs. Using Chinese international assignees as the sample, this study aims to contribute to IA theories by adding data from and interpretations of the careers, focusing specifically on the motivation to accept an IA, how the IA is experienced and

how that experience affects career development retrospectively. The primary research question driving this study is:

How is an IA perceived by Chinese international assignees?

1.3 The Theoretical Context of the Problem

This research adopts an integrative conceptual approach to the study of the motivations, perceptions and experiences of Chinese assignees. To understand the challenges and issues international assignees may face during IAs, scholars have used different theoretical perspectives. Some investigate the process of the ‘decision to go’, focusing on motivational factors for accepting an IA (e.g., Dickmann, Doherty, Mills, & Brewster, 2008; Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011; Haines Iii, Saba, & Choquette, 2008; Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso, & Werther Jr, 2012). Some give attention to the individual experience analysing issues and challenges related to adjustment, satisfaction and social integration (e.g., Andreason, 2008; Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997; Osland & Osland, 2005; Selmer, 2002; Stroppa & Spiess, 2011). Others put more specific emphases on the impact of IA on career development and outcomes (e.g., Baruch, Altman, & Adler, 2009; Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Cappellen & Janssens, 2010; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Dickmann & Doherty, 2007; Jokinen et al., 2008; Kraimer et al., 2009). These studies provided valuable insights for understanding the important issues related to expatriation, but the complexity of IAs call for a multi-dimensional analysis of individual experiences (Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2012). This is particularly important for exploring an under-researched sample such as Chinese

international assignees given the unique characteristics of Chinese MNCs and the cultural context they are in.

In terms of operationalising the research, this study follows a phenomenological paradigm which focuses on

the study and imputation of meanings, motives, intention, emotion, and feelings, as these mental and interactive states are experienced and organised by interacting individuals ... The streams of experiences which persons construct, give meaning to, and inhabit. (Denzin, 1992, p. 129)

Under this philosophy, IAs can be understood as individual experiences according to the meaning and interpretations of the assignees themselves, as they make sense of the context, and interaction with others within (and across) the context. To achieve this philosophical objective, a study is devised following several steps. First, the most important step is to establish the research questions, following an extensive review of the existing literature related to the topic. It becomes clear that, from an individual perspective, motivation, IA experiences and career issues are main areas of interest within the literature. Hence, a conceptual framework is formulated integrating these main focuses. To understand individual experiences and perceptions, a qualitative method, semi-structured interview is chosen to provide rich interpretive information. The rationale for the focus and methodological approach are further evaluated in Section 4.2 and Section 4.3 of Chapter Four.

1.4 The Research Approach

IA research, and specifically the individual IA experience, requires a focus on the subjective elements of human reflection and interaction. International assignees may view the world through different cultural lenses than their co-workers from both home and host countries while working on IA projects in a multicultural context, and perceptions are dynamic as experience unfolds. Taking into account the complexity involved in intercultural adjustment and organisational responsibilities for the international assignee, investigating IA issues lends itself to qualitative methods, ‘to hone in on the right issues and do it in a way to add knowledge to our field’ (Von Glinow, Drost, & Teagarden, 2002 , p. 131). In particular, the research questions require an understanding of how assignees perceive IAs and what kind of information, relationships, and behaviours contribute to IA development in an intercultural context (Dowling et al., 2009).

An interpretive methodology was employed to interpret the narrative data collected through first-hand accounts from international assignees. Lincoln and Guba (1990, p. 58) assert that authenticity of findings from qualitative research often better ‘express multiple, socially constructed, and often conflicting realities’ when individual perspectives and cultural differences are present in the field of inquiry. The need for an interpretive approach in this study reflects an ontology of truth and subjectivist epistemology in which knowledge and understanding are individual and socially constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thirty-one Chinese international assignees were

interviewed to elicit themes relevant to motivation, experience and career capital as they adapted to their new work role and host country.

1.5 The Significance of the Study

The analysis of interview texts revealed the three major themes in this study. The findings show variations in IA experiences reflecting both the uniqueness of each assignment as well as individual differences of international assignees, while showing the commonalities to the collective IA experience, providing an insight into the meaning of international experience.

To investigate the relationships between motives, experiences and career capital in the Chinese/Western context, the issues addressed in this study make an empirical and conceptual contribution to knowledge as follows:

First, the study contributes to the development of career capital theories by introducing a distinct sample into the body of knowledge. The career models are tested using a different national (institutional and cultural) perspective in the context of Chinese workers posted to Western countries. This study also contributes to the emergence of 'protean' and 'boundaryless' careers arguing the importance of self, relationships, organisations and social context. The importance of context revealed in this study emphasises the need for an integrated contextual approach for investigating international careers. In addition, the study contributes to a better understanding of international human resource management in Chinese MNCs, which is also under-

researched. The study focuses on international assignees' perceptions of organisational policies and support within different Chinese MNCs offering comparisons of IA management practices between Chinese companies and their Western counterparts. China's rapidly changing internal economy and its growing role in the global economy calls for a need to build a bridge between Western conceptions and understanding of the Chinese economy, and current Chinese business practices. Examining the Chinese way of doing business may be useful as a precondition or strategy for Western entry to the Chinese market.

1.6 The Researcher's Experience in Shaping this Study

My personal experience and interests have played an important role in the decision to study Chinese assignees. This is in line with Denzin's (1989, p. 76) observation that choice of research topic represents 'a highly personal decision'. Being a Chinese who has been living in New Zealand for more than ten years, my experiences have been a range of good, and sometimes frustrating memories. These are often the result of differences and challenges between cultures. China is the country where I grew up and received fundamental lessons on cultural values and as my family members remain in China, I retain strong social ties and connections with my cultural roots. However, New Zealand is the place where I opened my mind and received my academic education and where I have spent much of my adult life. From time to time, I seemed to struggle to find my 'belongingness' and social identity. These experiences sparked my curiosity about whether international experiences add value to personal satisfaction and growth,

and therefore motivated me to explore the notion of international experience for my Doctoral study.

International assignees are considered as part of the elite of organisations and international experience is assumed to be a matter of pride, status and satisfaction. However, from investigating the literature, I developed further understanding of the challenges, difficulties and issues during IA. This connected with my own experience over the years to refine a number of questions. First, what makes assignees decide to accept an IA initially? Second, what kind of experiences do they have and how do they think about them? Third, how do they develop their careers, and manage their personal and professional lives across cultural contexts? These questions inspired me to examine IAs empirically for my doctoral research. This study has provided a deeper personal understanding and validation of the importance of cultural understanding among people who travel, live and experience across national boundaries.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used frequently in research on IAs, careers, and cultural issues in business. To ensure a shared understanding of the meaning of these terms, the following definitions were selected as appropriate in the context of this research project.

Multinational companies

A multinational company is defined as ‘an enterprise that engages in foreign direct investment and owns or, in some way, controls value-added activities in more than one country’ (Dunning & Lundan, 2008, p.3). Its origins can be tracked back to the Middle Ages when embryonic foreign trade activities can be found in the Middle East, Rome and China (Moore & Lewis, 1999). To be more specific in the contemporary context, Barlett and Ghoshal (2003, p. 102) argue that the complexity of organisations in recent decades called for a new definition of enterprises operating across national borders: ‘this kind of organisation characterises a transnational rather than an old-line multinational, international, or global company. Transnationals integrate assets, resources, and diverse people in operating units around the world’. The term ‘transnational’ was firstly adopted by the United Nations Centre on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC) in 1974 to distinguish between companies domiciled in one country of Latin America, which might invest in another, from those originating from outside the region. Despite the differences in interpretation, this research, like many other studies, uses these two terminologies interchangeably because it does not attempt to focus on the theoretical underpinning of MNCs.

International assignment and assignees

There is no precise and universally agreed definition of what constitutes an international assignment. The term is used in different ways. Generally, it can be divided into two categories including self-initiated overseas experiences and company-backed IAs (Inkson et al., 1997). The latter category is initiated by the company, and usually

involves the job-related participation outside the parent country (Meyskens, Von Glinow, Werther Jr, & Clarke, 2009). While traditional IAs, which involve long-term relocation and often last between three to five years, are still considered an important part of international human resource management, increasing attention has been given to the rising alternative forms of assignments such as short-term assignments and ‘frequent flyers’ (Collings et al., 2007). Unlike Western MNCs, the most commonly used IA among Chinese MNCs is short-term assignments which often last between one and 12 months (Shen, 2006). This leads to the need to use a broader definition of international assignment to reflect the importance of various forms of assignments and the specific characteristics of Chinese assignments.

The working definition adopted for this study, therefore is: a relocation from the home country to a foreign country at the behest of the organisations. Similar to the definition of international assignment, the definition of international assignees has a broad scope including individuals who relocate to another country for company assigned tasks and projects.

Career capital

This study adopts the broad perspective in defining career as ‘the evolving sequence of a person’s work experiences over time’ (Arthur, Hall, & Lawrence, 1989, p.8). In this definition, the concept of career includes all types of work transitions: changing jobs, organisations, occupations, and even exiting the workforce. All of these transitions define ways of how individuals see and experience other people, organisations and

societies. This definition also outlines the resource focus of individuals' working experience. In this resource-based view, it is assumed that people utilise the knowledge, skills and experiences that they acquire and accumulate from previous and current employment to achieve career goals (Inkson, 2007).

DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) explain the construct of career capital as three different ways of knowing – knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom. Knowing-how competencies reflect career-relevant skills, expertise and tacit and explicit knowledge which accrue over time (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Knowing-why career capital is related to motivation, meaning and personal understanding of career values. Knowing-whom career capital includes networks and social contacts that an individual gathers during his/her career life.

Context

Context is defined as the set of circumstances or facts that surround a particular event or situation (Merriam-Webster, 2004). As there is a limited understanding of context in the IA literature, it is necessary to adopt a broad and general definition so potentially important meanings are not excluded.

Culture

Culture is defined as shared values, attitudes, beliefs, and norms developed over time in relationship to a group's environment (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 1999).

1.8 Overview of the Thesis

Chapter Two reviews the literature including conceptual and theoretical research on IAs and careers within multinational organisations. The body of research on the constructs of motivation, IA experience and career capital provides a framework for understanding the real significance and value of IAs for individuals. Research on international assignees examines factors influencing IA effectiveness and individual satisfaction. The conceptual and theoretical background of contextual factors will be reviewed as well as preliminary research on IA management to support adjustment to working and living in another country.

Chapter Three reviews the specific context of this study: China and Chinese MNCs. The discussion illuminates the relevance of cultural differences between China and the West, and the corresponding potential challenges presented by transition to work in another culture. This chapter also includes a review of IA and international human resource management research publications in major Chinese academic journals outlining research themes and trends, as well as confirming the research gaps in both Western and Chinese literature. Chapter Four provides an explanation of interpretivism as the appropriate methodology used in the study. Implementation of research methods in sample selection, developing interview questions, content coding, and interpreting narratives to reach findings consistent with qualitative epistemology are discussed.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven contain the findings from the analysis of data. Chapter Five discusses themes related to motivation, focusing on both dominant and subsidiary

factors affecting individual decisions for accepting an IA. Chapter Six addresses the second part of questions centring on participants' evaluations of their experience of IAs with specific focus on their perceptions of career capital. Chapter Seven, taking an overview and linking both motivation and experiences, explores the perceived contextual influences during an IA. In addition to addressing the respective research objectives, the findings are discussed in the light of related areas of literature. Where appropriate, the contribution that the findings make to the respective bodies of literature, especially to understandings of IA are signalled.

The conclusion of the study is presented in Chapter Eight. It also highlights the salient findings from this study for the field of individual and organisational development, as well as identifying the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and reflections on the research process.

Chapter Two

Literature: International Assignments

He [sic] who by reviewing the old can gain knowledge of the new and is fit to be a teacher.

-- Confucius

2.1 Introduction

The topic of international assignments has an established pedigree in the international management literature and has defined the research agenda of international human resource management for over three decades. While the research focus of those investigating the international human resource management field has expanded significantly in recent years, international assignees' management issues remain a critical concern (Collings, Scullion, & Dowling, 2009; Stahl & Bjorkman, 2006). The theoretical and conceptual background for this study of Chinese international assignees involves three broad areas of research: motivations, IA experiences and career capital development in an international organisational setting. To identify key research gaps in the literature and set up the context for the study, the following review of the literature presents salient issues in each of these areas as they relate to individual perceptions and personal development on an international work assignment. First, the changing nature of IAs confirms the need to investigate alternative forms of IA (e.g., short-term IAs) and the rationale to examine less-acknowledged organisational practices such as those from

Chinese MNCs. Second, individual and organisational motives are compared to understand differences in expectations from IAs, and ultimately the potential causes for high costs and turnover that are associated with individual dissatisfaction (Hemmasi, Downes, & Varner, 2010; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). This sets the stage for discussing ways MNCs might implement or support assignees before, during and after an IA. Third, several theories on IA experiences present the backdrop for challenges encountered on IAs that present additional layers of complexity to assignees' socialisation and career development needs distinct from the domestic environment. Finally, the chapter reviews the research exploring assignees' career issues showcase theories on career mobility, development and success in an international context, primarily based on quantitative studies of Western international assignees.

2.2 Organisational Motives

A significant stream of the published research relating to IAs deals with motivations for organisational uses of IAs and individual willingness to accept an IA. From an organisational perspective, the motives are associated with strategic success. There is growing recognition that such strategic effectiveness of international business depends most importantly on the quality of global managers (Thomas, Lazarova, & Inkson, 2005; Yan, Zhu, & Hall, 2002). For Western MNCs, international assignees are often used as 'position fillers', to deal with policy convergence and divergence in different countries (Sparrow, Brewster, & Harris, 2004), to develop global competencies for managers (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005), to transfer technical and managerial skills

(Morley, Heraty, & Collings, 2006), and to ensure control and coordination from the head offices (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992). As part of a talent management strategy, MNCs integrate IAs into their international human resource management and utilise them to achieve organisational objectives.

Because Chinese MNCs are different to their Western counterparts in terms of their institutional and cultural context, it is possible that they also have different motives for sending employees on IAs. This field, however, is a largely unexplored research area. Shen and Edwards (2006) provide an initial exploration of Chinese organisational practices for IAs. Through the use of interviews, they found the motives of Chinese organisations were very different to Western organisations. The most frequently reported reasons for using international assignees among Chinese organisations are for administration, financial control and specific technical requirements such as marketing and IT solutions. The use of IAs to enable control, coordination of global activities and trouble-shooting are also important issues. Many Chinese MNCs use international assignees as a 'control mechanism' to maintain a close fit with the Chinese headquarters' strategies and political agenda.

2.3 The Changing Forms of International Assignment

Originally, the focus of research into these issues has been on organisation-initiated, long-term overseas assignments (Tarique & Schuler, 2010). This type of IA normally lasts between three to five years and international assignees are often accompanied with their partner and children. While there is little evidence suggesting a decline in the

organisational use of long term expatriation, research across a number of countries suggests the growing use of alternative forms of IAs such as short-term IAs and frequent flyers (Collings et al., 2007; De Cieri, Cox, & Fenwick, 2007; Fenwick, 2004; Welch, Steen, & Tahvanainen, 2009). This section first reviews drivers behind these changes, and then discusses alternative forms of IAs and their relevance to the study.

There are several reasons contributing to the changing forms of IAs. The first is associated with the high personal and organisational costs of conventional international assignee assignments (Morley et al., 2006). It is commonly identified in the literature that high costs are the result of poor IA adjustment (Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999; Shay & Baack, 2004), premature withdrawal from IAs (Shaffer & Harrison, 1998), high turnover rates (Stahl et al., 2009; Stroh, 1995; van der Heijden & Paauwe, 2009) and job difficulties after repatriation (Kraimer et al., 2009; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). While research indicates that cost reduction in IAs is a priority in the development of IA practices (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005), few organisations have a true grasp of the costs and benefits associated with IAs (Sparrow et al., 2004). However, it is generally estimated that the organisational cost associated with the IA is between three and five times an assignee's home salary per annum (Selmer, 2001). The difficulties in measuring return on investment on IAs, apart from methodological differences among studies, come from organisational practices and strategic processes in particular, MNCs' main focus has been on strategy formulation, often with a relative lack of attention to implementation issues (Welch et al., 2009). A failure of strategic planning at the operational level is sometimes reflected in limited development of

human resource policies and practices aimed at ensuring congruence between employees' work behaviours and organisational strategy (Collings et al., 2007). MNCs may have a well-designed strategy with regard to staffing their foreign operations, but they frequently fail to monitor and support the international assignees to meet organisational objectives (Stahl et al., 2009).

The second challenge to conventional IAs, and something that signals a need for change, is the increasing difficulty of attracting, motivating and retaining international assignees. Long-term IAs often mean that decisions not only involve more complex job arrangements but also greater disruption of personal and social lives. The willingness of an international assignee's partner's acceptance, dual career issues and children's education are seen as major barriers to international mobility (Dickmann et al., 2008). The security concerns since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have added further pressure to many Western MNCs for attracting employees to accept IAs. An annual international report finds many MNCs struggle to send workers on assignments even four years after the tragedy (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). Another supply side constraint is the weakness of talent management systems in many MNCs, which recruit, retain, develop and motivate a competent cohort of managerial talent with appropriate international experience in the global business environment (Briscoe & Schuler, 2004; Collings et al., 2007). Research suggests that job arrangements after repatriation are a major international human resource management problem for MNCs and the costs of international assignee turnover are considerable (Dowling & Schuler, 2004). MNCs fail to develop repatriation policies which effectively assist international assignees' career

progression after returning home, forcing many to seek alternative employment before repatriation (Kraimer, et al., 2009).

Another reason behind the changes to the form of IAs is the shifting organisational structure and strategies in the current economic environment. The 2008 financial crisis has reshaped the landscape of international business leaving MNCs to consider different options such as decreasing the number of subsidiaries or developing more effective global integration systems to reduce costs and increase efficiency. The demand for international assignees, as a result, has decreased. An increasing number of MNCs have developed global strategic plans that focus on collaborative global networks, efficient communication and cost effective business operation. Increased utilisation of more sophisticated information technology also makes it possible to handle business tasks without an international posting (Meyskens et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the rapid growth of emerging economies such as China and India had a significant impact on both the demand and supply of international managers (Alon & McIntyre, 2008). Indeed, India and China have been identified as major inward foreign direct investment destinations since the late 1990s (UNCTAD, 2008). In this regard, the growth of these markets has led to an increasing demand outside China for managers with the distinctive competencies and the desires to manage in these culturally and economically distant countries (Bjorkman & Fan, 2002). In addition, the growth of these emerging countries have resulted in an increasing number of new MNCs within these markets. Many of these companies come from a wider range of organisations than

the traditional large MNCs, due to the rapid growth of small and medium enterprise internationalisation (Alon & McIntyre, 2008) and international joint ventures (Verburg, 1996). These MNCs, unlike their Western counterparts, have limited international knowledge, experience and resources. Different development patterns, influenced by their international strategies and objectives, have resulted in different motivations for the utilisation of IAs (Deng, 2003).

The final reason for the changing form of IA is the changing nature of careers in the international context. Changing attitudes toward careers affect the willingness of employees to accept overseas assignments, the conditions under which assignments are accepted, and retention after assignments. There is a growing body of research which indicates that international assignees perceive the value of an assignment to be in developing individual competence which can be transferred across organisations and which is valued in the external labour market (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson, 2007; Parker & Arthur, 2000). This resonates with the emerging literature focusing on individual job satisfaction which emphasises the importance and transferability of career competencies (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Section 2.7 will review career issues more closely.

Another key theme with regard to the changing nature of careers in the global context is the emergence of self-initiated expatriation (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Jokinen et al., 2008). These self-initiated expatriates are motivated to live or work internationally for different reasons and are responsible for their own career development. The key

implication of the increasing number of self-initiated expatriates who are joining the global labour market is that MNCs can make use of these employees to fill key positions in subsidiary operations at a lower cost than international assignees (Jokinen et al., 2008). However, their career development issues may add more pressure to international human resource management and MNCs due to the highly mobile nature of self-initiated expatriates. There is also a growing acknowledgment among researchers that the boundaries between self-initiated expatriates and company-backed assignees are being blurred with increasing recognition of other sub-groups or nested groupings in the field (Doherty, Richardson, & Thorn, 2013). One example that captures these changes is the concept of the global self-initiated corporate expatriate (Altman & Baruch, 2012), who self-initiates expatriation but with a single employer. They would seek out a foreign posting within their organisation, perhaps to a foreign subsidiary, rather than wait to be sent by their employer.

These changes call for more examination on diverse (or new) forms of IAs and take the focus off long-term IAs which have dominated the international human resource management literature. The next section examines these alternative forms and discusses their relevance to this study.

2.4 Alternative Forms of IAs

2.4.1 Short-term IAs

There is some variation in the literature in terms of how short-term IAs are defined but generally they are referred to as company-specific assignments with a duration shorter than 12 months (Collings et al., 2007). A significant feature of short-term IAs is that the assignee's family often remain in the home country, while salary, pension and social security benefits are also handled there (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). Short-term assignments are considered the most popular form of non-standard assignments with an increasing utilisation in MNCs (Tahvanainen, Welch, & Worm, 2005). The organisational motivations for using short-term assignments are similar to standard assignments such as problem solving, control purposes and management development, but with advantages such as increased flexibility, simplicity and cost effectiveness. Although the shorter duration may have a positive impact on individual's willingness to accepting such an IA, there are issues that concern both MNCs and individuals. Family issues are important because being away from partners and children can be stressful for assignees. Careers can be also affected as a short-term stay at the subsidiary may limit the building of effective relationships with local colleagues and customers, while being away from headquarters may cause difficulties in maintaining existing relationships (Tahvanainen et al., 2005).

Short-term assignments have particular relevance in this study as 70% of IAs used by Chinese MNCs are conducted in this form (Shen, 2004). Chinese MNCs are strongly

ethnocentric and withhold control over the administrative processes and politics of subsidiaries (Alon & McIntyre, 2008; Yang & Stoltenberg, 2008). In this form of MNC structure, the objective is to ensure effective and efficient practice transfer between the headquarters and subsidiaries, overshadowing the need for management development and long term assignments. Another influencing factor, relevant to Chinese international assignees, is more pragmatic, as there are limitations on visas or work permits for Chinese citizens in some countries, resulting in assignments having to be less than 12 months (Shen, 2006).

2.4.2 Frequent Flyers, Commuter IAs and Global Virtual Teams

While different forms of IAs such as frequent flyers, commuter IAs and global virtual teams are not specifically included in this study, it is important to discuss them as there is an organisational trend to use more flexible IA options with shorter durations. They also point to a research gap, not least in the Chinese IA literature, and provide implications for future research (see Section 8.7).

A frequent flyer is defined as ‘one for whom business travel is an essential component of their work’ (Welch & Worm, 2006, p. 284), and who travels often but temporarily, to other destinations. Although some researchers argue that frequent flyers do not come under the remit of alternative forms of IA as their travel does not involve physical relocation (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl, & Kollinger, 2004), following Fenwick’s (2004) suggestion, this study includes them with the acknowledgment that

frequent flyers represent important alternatives to traditional international assignee assignments for MNCs.

Frequent flying is an effective way to conduct irregular and specialised tasks such as technical problem resolving and annual board meetings. It is cost-effective for MNCs as they can send out specialised staff based on demand without the need to relocate them to individual subsidiaries. It is particularly appropriate in the European and South East Asian contexts, where many countries can be reached with a short flight. This is also relevant to Chinese MNCs as many of their subsidiaries are concentrated in regional locations (Alon & McIntyre, 2008). However, similar to the literature on short-term assignments, there is a dearth of empirical research on why and how Chinese MNCs utilise this type of IA and research on these issues would be timely.

Although frequent flyers offer several benefits to MNCs, they are not without difficulties. The stress and other health concerns that are caused by frequent air travel are well documented in the literature (Welch & Worm, 2006) and again, family issues associated with frequent short trips should not be underestimated (Collings et al., 2007).

Commuter IAs are defined as IA tasks where assignees commute from their home base to another country, generally on a regular or rotational basis (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). Assignees are usually sent on commuter IAs to complete technical tasks in one or more countries and then return to headquarters for technical and managerial briefings. It has been suggested that the geographic proximity of countries in Europe means that Euro-commuting and frequent visiting is a viable alternative to conventional

expatriation, however, research indicates that very few organisations employ this type of IA (Brewster, Mayrhofer, & Morley, 2004). Apart from the complexity of this type of IA, research also indicates the concerns about the build up of stress from intensive travel commitments and the impact on personal relationships (Dowling & Schuler, 2004). Commuter IAs are not commonly used by Chinese MNCs, perhaps due to the distance restrictions between China and many of its foreign direct investment destinations.

Global virtual teams emerged in the late 1990s due to the growth of the internet and other communication technologies (Collings et al., 2007). In global virtual teams, staff can work jointly from different locations without travelling (Dowling & Schuler, 2004). Although cost effective and without the disadvantages that are associated with travelling, their use is limited in MNCs (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005), primarily because of the importance of physical interaction for effective management. Further research on the use and effectiveness of virtual assignments in organisations is needed and could focus on the circumstances in which such assignments would be appropriate and the key factors which contribute to their effectiveness (Collings et al., 2007).

These alternative forms of IAs confirm the changing nature of MNCs, their practices and the international environment they are in (Dowling et al., 2009; Meyskens et al., 2009). Challenges and issues from long-term IAs give MNCs pressures to seek more cost effective expatriation management practices. However, this does not mean alternative forms (such as short-term assignments) are without problems. It may be

timely to further investigate the issues relating to both long-term and short-term international assignees.

2.5 Individual Motivations

Motivation is a psychological feature that an individual act towards a desired goal and elicits, control, and sustains certain goal-directed behaviours (Weiner, 1972). In the context of this study, motivation can be considered as a driving force for the decisions of international assignees to take an international opportunity. International assignees are motivated to accept IAs for different reasons. One of the significant features in the IA literature is the divergence between organisational and individual motives and how the differences contribute to IA difficulties (Dickmann & Doherty, 2010; Dickmann et al., 2008). In the individual domain, some motives are directly linked to their expectation of career development such as higher salary (Dickmann et al., 2008), increased prospects of future promotion (Fish & Wood, 1996), increased job security (Dunbar, 1992) and improved career mobility (Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002). International assignees expect to learn new skills, enhance social networks, and develop global mindsets that are beneficial for their career progression within and between organisations. Stahl, Miller and Tung (2002) find that 59% of international assignees believe that IAs are beneficial for their career advancement.

Although career reasons undoubtedly play a very important role in the decision making process of many employees, it only provides a partial answer to what motivates employees to accept an IA. A number of studies indicate non-work aspects of the

relocation decision. For example, some international assignees are attracted by the fact that an IA offers challenges in different cultural contexts (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). The new experiences that are obtained from an IA are beyond assignment success in professional terms and reflect individuals' desires for personal development and growth. Family issues, such as spousal influences and children's education in host countries are also strong motives in the decision making process (Sparrow et al., 2004). These non-work factors can significantly affect international assignees' willingness to relocate internationally.

These factors can be also categorised into both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Haines, Saba, & Choquette, 2008). Intrinsic motivation refers to motivation that is driven by an interest or enjoyment and exists within the individual rather than relying on external pressures or a desire for reward. For example, the desire to experience a different culture is an intrinsic (subjective) factor for accepting an IA. In comparison, extrinsic motivation refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain an outcome. Extrinsic motivation comes from outside the individual and often provides measurable fulfillment such as promotion and monetary rewards. Assignees are often motivated to accept an IA for these extrinsic reasons, hoping their international experiences will result in objective outcomes such as skill development or higher pay.

While researchers endeavour to establish a full understanding of these motives, it remains unknown to what extent the lists of motives used in the structured surveys capture all relevant reasons (Pinto et al., 2012). This is a reflection of complexity of IAs

but also evidence of empirical inadequacy in this area. Another key gap in the literature is how relevant these motives are in samples of distinctive cultural groups. The different economic and social infrastructures of China, as well as organisational characteristics and practices of Chinese MNCs, may influence people's needs and, therefore, their motives for accepting an IA. An attempt to understand the IA decision-making process of Chinese employees would help to address this gap.

2.6 Experience

Another key stream of scholarship and research investigates the individual experience during an IA. The challenging nature of international experience means it is important for MNCs to implement effective practices to support international assignees. The key issues emerging from the published literature are categorised as adjustment, acculturation and career.

2.6.1 Adjustment

From the preceding discussion, it is plausible to argue that IAs are important for both organisations and individuals, yet research suggests there are problematic areas for both parties. It is often difficult to predict or measure the outcome and value from an international experience because of the full range of tangible and intangible cost-benefit factors that are associated with IAs (Welch et al., 2009). For individuals, IAs can be challenging. Cultural shock, adjustment difficulties and family issues have been identified as the main reasons behind IA failure (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009).

Although international assignees are motivated to accept IAs because of potential career development and financial gain (Dickmann et al., 2008), the differences between individuals' perceived and actual career outcomes from IAs can lead to job dissatisfaction, premature return and high repatriation turnover (Benson & Pattie, 2008). The latest Global Relocation Trends Survey notes that the five percent of assignments were not completed because assignees returned prematurely and 38% of employees leave the company within one year of repatriation (Brookfield, 2012). High financial costs, early returns and repatriation turnovers remain as reasons for major IA failures (Mendenhall et al., 2002; Shay & Baack, 2004).

One way to minimise the potential challenges during an IA is to better select suitable employees for the international tasks (Caligiuri, Tarique, & Jacobs, 2009). Individual differences such as personality, language skills, and previous international working experiences are used to predict IA effectiveness (Downes, Varner, & Hemmasi, 2010). It is believed that organisational practices such as cross-cultural training and family support are important factors contributing to IA success. For example, if the organisation assists the international assignee to secure employment for a partner or suitable education for the children, pressure on the family can be significantly reduced and this is more likely to have a positive impact on outcomes from IAs (Fish & Wood, 1997).

2.6.2 Acculturation

The cross-cultural nature of IAs means that international assignees' perceptions of cultural differences are a significant part of the international experience (Osland & Osland, 2005). Acculturation is the term used to explain the process of cultural and psychological change that results following meeting between cultures (Sam & Berry, 2010).

Some studies consider cultural issues as a significant contributing factor to adjustment difficulties and IA failure. For example, language barriers can be challenging for international assignees at work because they may create communication difficulties or hinder the effectiveness of work performance (Lee & Van Vorst, 2010). These challenges can be extended to personal lives in which international assignees find it difficult to integrate to a new social context. Challenges for the assignees' partner and children's interactions with others in a new cultural environment are also identifiable in the literature. International assignees often consider themselves as 'outsiders' and find it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding on new cultural norms. These difficulties also challenge assignees' identity (Kohonen, 2008) and cause them to re-evaluate the value of the IA.

Despite these difficulties, some researchers think these cultural challenges can be beneficial for assignees' long-term career development (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Dickmann & Harris, 2005). Through IAs, assignees may develop critical skills such as cross-cultural communication and a better understanding of cultural differences which

are valuable experiences for employees' personal and professional development as well as achieving their organisations' international strategies. International assignees who have previous cross-cultural experience may develop an interest in exploring different cultures and often consider maintaining their global identity for future careers (Kohonen, 2005).

2.6.3 International Careers

As suggested above, a significant and increasing important feature of IA literature is the focus on career development. For example, Cerdin and Birth (2008) conclude that the most significant implication of future research is redirecting the focus of the IA literature from adjustment to career-centric issues. The growing numbers of MNCs and more frequent international co-operation have resulted in increasing numbers of individuals who pursue their career goals in the global context.

Many of the career studies focus on how international experience affects individuals' career development. For example, some investigate how IAs affect assignees' career success and satisfaction both objectively and subjectively (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Kreng & Huang, 2009), others examine the effect of IAs on career mobility (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Spell & Blum, 2000; Stahl et al., 2002), while others explore the impact on skills, knowledge and changes in perception of future career direction (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Kramer, 2006) and consequently their competitiveness (Caligiuri & Di Santo, 2001). Because career is the most notable

topic in the IA literature and is especially relevant to this research, the following section provides a more comprehensive review of this area.

2.7 Career

Career development remains a key issue from both individual and organisational perspectives. For example, assignees may accept an IA for potential career benefits (Dickmann et al., 2008); they may develop certain career competencies which relate to adjustment and new learnings from an IA (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Jokinen et al., 2008); they may face career difficulties upon return (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Kraimer et al., 2009). The consistency of career issues through different stages of IA calls for a better understanding of their roles. This study uses the career capital concept to investigate IA experiences.

2.7.1 Defining Career

Traditionally, careers were defined in terms of an individual's relationship to an employing organisation. These linear careers were described as taking place within the context of a stable, organisational structure (Levinson, 1978), with individuals progressing up the firm's hierarchy seeking to obtain greater extrinsic rewards (Rosenbaum, 1979). The employer-employee relationship was characterised by an exchange of worker loyalty for the firm's implicit promise of job security (Rousseau, 1989). While these traditional interpretations of careers still have relevance, their significance and applicability have been limited due to environmental changes, such as

increased globalisation, rapid technological advancements and increased workforce diversity. Outsourcing and part-time and temporary employees have also challenged the traditional forms of employment (Brewster, Sparrow, & Vernon, 2007).

Changes also exist in how individuals enact their careers. For example, recent mass layoffs due to the global financial crisis have forced many older workers to reconsider their career path (Browning & Silver, 2008), while others have postponed their retirement plans or returned to the workforce after a period of retirement due to financial problems (Wang, Beehr, & Shultz, 2009). In addition to environmental changes, individuals are changing their career attitudes, perceptions and behaviours in response to many factors such as lengthened work lives, changing family structures and increasing needs for personal learning, development and growth (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). All of these changes contribute to the complexity of career concepts and therefore result in an evaluation of today's career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002).

This study adopts a broad perspective in defining career as 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur et al., 1989, p.8). In this definition, the concept of career includes all types of work transitions: changing jobs, organisations, occupations, and even exiting the workforce. All of these transitions influence ways of how individuals see and experience other people, organisations and societies. This definition also adopts a resource-based view of individuals' working experience, where it is assumed that people utilise the knowledge, skills and experiences that they acquire

and accumulate from previous and current employment to achieve career goals (Inkson, 2007).

2.7.2 Success

The success or failure of an IA can affect an individual's career success. Career success is an outcome of a person's working life and can be defined as 'the accumulated positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences' (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001, p. 7). This definition accommodates two meanings of success, namely 'the prosperous achievement of something attempted', and 'the attainment of an objective according to one's desire' (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 93). The first meaning defines a form of success that is likely to rely on social comparisons (objective success), while the second involves a form of success that is personally desirable (subjective success).

Objective or extrinsic career success refers to 'an external perspective that delineates more or less tangible indicators of an individual's career situation' (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005, p. 179). Objective constructs, such as salary and promotion, are used in measuring this career success. It is evaluated objectively by others and reflects shared social understanding rather than distinctive individual understanding (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003).

Subjective career success, however, emphasises an individual's psychological judgement on their career achievements (Eby et al., 2003) and represents a personal

evaluation of an individual's career, taking into account all dimensions that are important to that individual (Arthur et al., 2005). It is a construct that exists only in people's minds. In a subjective view, careers are about how people make sense of their journey and this sense-making may have implications for their future career. Job satisfaction, self-awareness, adaptability and learning are often used as the criteria of subjective career success (e.g., Aryee, Chay, & Tan, 1994; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Kohonen, 2005).

Research in the area of career success tends to be inadequate theoretically and empirically (Arthur et al., 2005) and there is little available that works specifically for IAs. The theoretical inadequacy comes from difficulties in assessing the relationship between the two perspectives of career success. Some research has an implicit assumption that subjective success is a direct function of objective outcomes and believes that an individual's personal growth and identity (subjective measures) are both outcomes of an individual's rank with a company hierarchy or income (objective measures) (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006). Other researchers believe subjective perceptions drive objective outcomes. For example, relationships between subjective constructs such as personality (Boudreau, Boswell, Judge, & Bretz, 2001), behaviours (Johnson & Strokes, 2002) or attitudes (Orpen, 1998) with objective career success have been hypothesised. An individual's psychological attributes influence their motives towards career decisions, and therefore, the objective outcomes.

Although attempts have been made to explore the interdependence between both subjective and objective perspectives on career success, their causal relationships are not clear (Abele & Spurk, 2009). The multi-faceted nature of career involving different roles from work, education, family and the society, suggests there may be complex underlying dimensions of career success that are beyond the current understanding (Mayrhofer, Briscoe, & Hall, 2012). Other variables such as employment opportunities (Arthur et al., 2005) and time factors (Abele & Spurk, 2009) are relevant in the interdependence of subjective and objective careers and are significant in predicting career success. Or perhaps only aspects of subjective (or objective) career success are important to some subjective (or objective) career success (Mayrhofer et al., 2012).

The empirical inadequacy comes from the difficulty of designing research to measure objective or subjective career success at a single point while neglecting the importance of variables such as time and career phase. Longitudinal studies can be used in studying career development over time, but many other variables such as organisational factors, family issues and personal criteria also influence the relationships between subjective and objective career success. The real issue of designing career success research, as Arthur, et al. (2005) point out, is the possibility of multidimensional facets of career success.

Taking into account the interdependence of subjective and objective career success and previous criticisms, this study takes an individual agency perspective (Giddens, 1984) to examine Chinese assignees' perception of the impact of IAs of career success. This

conforms to the notion that the 'career is an individual's property' (Inkson & Arthur, 2001, p. 49), particularly in today's highly competitive labour market. Using the agency perspective does not mean that this study disregards the structural influences such as institutional factors (Wilensky, 1961), but emphasises the subjective nature of interpreting career success. Individuals are the major actors within their careers. Objective and subjective career success only become meaningful when they are filtered through the individual's mind and compared with their value system (Tice & Wallace, 2003). The interpretation and reinterpretation of individual career success are ongoing, involving an individual's evaluation of subjective and objective returns from career investments (Arthur et al., 2005). A study which focuses on the perceived impacts of IAs on career success would address a gap in the current knowledge. In other words, it would be valuable to find out how Chinese international assignees understand and interpret the international experiences in both objective and subjective terms, providing a snapshot on the duality and the interdependence of these perspectives. More importantly, by using a qualitative approach to the research, rich and in-depth information can be obtained from these career actors, allowing them to elaborate on and interpret their own career success - a subjective input that most career studies are lacking (Arthur et al., 2005). Section 2.8 explores the theoretical, empirical and methodological gaps of current research.

2.7.3 Mobility

Another theoretical development in the career literature is triggered by intensified career mobility. In a career sense, mobility involves both physical movements within and between organisations, and opportunities for inter-organisational mobility. In the 1990s, the research focus has shifted from the traditional ‘climbing the organisational hierarchy’ to something more closely resembling a ‘boundaryless career’ (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), something that persists today and is in line with an ‘individual agency’ perspective which is about the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free career choices. Central to the emerging debate is the argument that there are new forms of careers depending increasingly on criteria determined by the external environment (such as marketability of expertise), external networks and information, and less on traditional organisational career arrangements (Tams & Arthur, 2010). Boundaryless career actors are perceived to be ‘mobile, self-determined ... free agents who are able to seamlessly connect with work in multiple contexts’ (Harrison, 2006, p. 20). In the original definition, boundaryless careers encompass six different meanings:

They (1) involve movement across the boundaries of several employers; (2) draw validation and marketability from outside one’s present employer; (3) are sustained by external networks and information; (4) break traditional organisational assumptions about hierarchy and career advancement; (5) involve rejecting existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons; and (6) are based on the interpretations of the career actor who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints. (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, p.6)

Hence, a boundaryless career is one which can traverse occupations, industries and locations. Therefore, in this view, boundaryless careers are considered as the personal property of individuals (Inkson & Arthur, 2001) and are consequently less constrained by organisational boundaries (Gunz, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). Moreover, it has subsequently been noted that mobility is not limited to across organisational boundaries but also occupational and geographical boundaries (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). For example, there is a trend that more people go abroad to work to seek higher pay, more career opportunities, a better lifestyle and improved social, cultural and political environments (Thorn, 2009b).

In addition to the physical movement across workplaces, some scholars have investigated the boundaryless career theory from a different perspective, suggesting that boundaryless careers not only involve physical movements in work arrangements, but also psychological changes (Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002; Valcour & Tolbert, 2003). For example, individuals may experience changes in their perception of current and future careers, and their views on how to define career success, and increasing numbers of authors are beginning to recognise the importance of these psychological career changes (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2005; Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Peiperl, Arthur, GoVee, & Morris, 2000). Another example of psychological change that boundaryless careers may involve ‘the opportunity for inter-organisational mobility rather than explicit changes of employer’ (Arthur et al., 2005, p. 181). These movements are not necessarily reflected in tangible measurements such as increases in salary or promotion, but in subjective terms such as individual satisfaction, self-

awareness, adaptability and learning opportunities all of which provide people with a sense of career achievement and future career direction (Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx, 2008).

Although physical and psychological mobility in careers are often operationalised and measured separately (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), they are not isolated constructs. The interdependency between them influences individuals' career mobility and hence, the boundaryless career can be viewed as varying levels of physical and psychological mobility.

The boundaryless career theory has received criticism on a number of grounds. One of the major critiques is of the 'universal boundarylessness' or the extent to which the boundaryless career has become the predominant career model (Zeitz, Blau, & Fertig, 2009, p. 373). In a conceptual paper, Inkson et al. (2012) argue that the dominance of boundaryless careers is not well supported by empirical evidence. Some authors believe that even under today's highly market-driven conditions, people's career movements are still bounded by individual differences, organisational and market factors (King, Burke, & Pemberton, 2005). For example, in a study on changing employment patterns in the USA, the majority of employees still experience traditional careers, despite a growth of nonstandard forms of work such as temporary, on-call, contract and part-time jobs (Carre, Ferber, Golden, & Herzberg, 2000).

Another criticism of the boundaryless career concerns the personal ownership of the career. Boundaryless careers are often defined as individual-level constructs (Rousseau,

1989) suggesting that boundaryless careers are personal property and that individuals have freedom regarding their career choices (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Bird, 1994). This interpretation neglects the contextual influences from organisations. While workers do experience more freedom of movement and a reduction of their loyalty to employers, most individuals construct their careers within organisations, and their career development is strongly influenced by the existing career management system (Peel & Inkson, 2004). Studies suggest that many workers are pushed into boundaryless careers by involuntary job losses, sometimes suffering long periods of unemployment and often finding only lower paying jobs (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001; Pollard, 2001). Career decisions such as changing jobs are often triggered by a combination of contextual factors such as job dissatisfaction, stress and role ambiguity (Griffith, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). Most people still prefer regular, secure jobs and most job turnover in the USA is involuntary (Bureau of Labor Statistics of USA, 2007).

The final criticism, and one particularly pertinent to this study, is that the boundaryless career may be essentially a developed country phenomenon (Morris & Wu, 2009). While research in France (Dany, Mallon, & Arthur, 2003), the UK (Guest & Davey, 1996) and Japan (Lincoln & Nakata, 1997) points to a shift from organisational careers to boundaryless careers, there is little known about the changing career patterns in less developed countries such as China (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The significant contextual differences between China and Western countries call for further examination of the applicability of this claim.

2.7.4 Career Capital

One of the reasons people volunteer for an IA is that they believe the experience will be beneficial for their careers and they will develop career capital. They are, therefore, working on the premise that their careers have economic value (Kuijpers et al., 2006) that they can use their experience to achieve personal goals. In a 'capitalistic' view of careers, an individual continually invests in their career throughout their life, and as it unfolds, a largely unknown interplay starts between the individual and the social context that the person is embedded in (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001). During personal, educational and professional development, this interplay leads to 'a constantly changing, nevertheless recognisable and partly stable portfolio of capital' (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003, p. 734). In line with this value-based view of career, DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) explain career capital in terms of three forms of knowing: knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom.

Knowing-how

Knowing-how competencies reflect career-relevant skills, expertise and tacit and explicit knowledge which accrue over time (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). These competencies not only involve skills and knowledge that are needed for performance, but also consist of soft skills such as communication and people skills, and hard skills such as technical expertise. These skills are not limited to job-related knowledge, skills and abilities that are required by the organisation, but also the occupational learning and personal development that are transferable across various boundaries (Eby et al., 2003;

Makela & Suutari, 2007). The implication for IAs is that international assignees may develop relevant knowledge and skills related to their jobs or international experience in general.

Knowing-why

Knowing-why competencies are related to career motivation, personal meaning and identification (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). They provide individuals with a sense of meaning regarding their careers and motivation to pursue career goals. Knowing-why competencies are important for both individuals and organisations, as without the sense-making that is shaped by knowing-why competencies, people would struggle with ambiguous career decisions resulting in a low subjective career success (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). From an organisation's perspective, individuals, including those on overseas postings, who are clear about their work tasks and why they are doing those, are more likely to be motivated in their work and therefore committed to achieve organisational efficiency.

Knowing-whom

Knowing-whom career competencies reflect 'the attachments, relationships, reputation, sources of information and mutual obligation that people gather as they pursue their careers' (Inkson & Arthur, 2001, p. 52). Knowing-whom capital not only includes contacts within organisations such as superiors and colleagues but also contacts outside organisations. For international assignees, it can be either business-related contacts such

as customers, competitors and suppliers, or personal social connections such as friendships developed during an IA (Parker & Arthur, 2000).

The concept of career capital has not been utilised much in the IA literature (Jokinen, 2010), even though there are several advantages of using the three ways of knowing as the criteria for measuring the impact of IAs. First, career is situated in a combination of individual, organisational and societal reality, and therefore a model which enables the integration of these multiple levels is needed. Career capital recognises the multiple facets of careers and provides a set of interpretative constructs. The three ways of knowing have been employed in a range of recent research including case study research to illustrate and interpret the accumulation of transferable career capital across successive employment situations (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999), as a framework for studying global careers (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009; Makela & Suutari, 2007), and as a method of inquiry to examine career outcomes, specifically in the context of IAs (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Jokinen, 2010; Kuijpers et al., 2006).

Second, this framework recognises the interdependence between, and complementary nature of, different forms of knowing (Inkson, 2007). Parker, Khapova and Arthur (2009) demonstrate their interrelationships, forming six one-way links between each way of knowing, representing distinct and largely disconnected lines of enquiry (Figure 2.1).

The inputs that individuals invest in one form of capital impact other forms of capital. For example, building a network (knowing-whom) with peers can affect an individual's

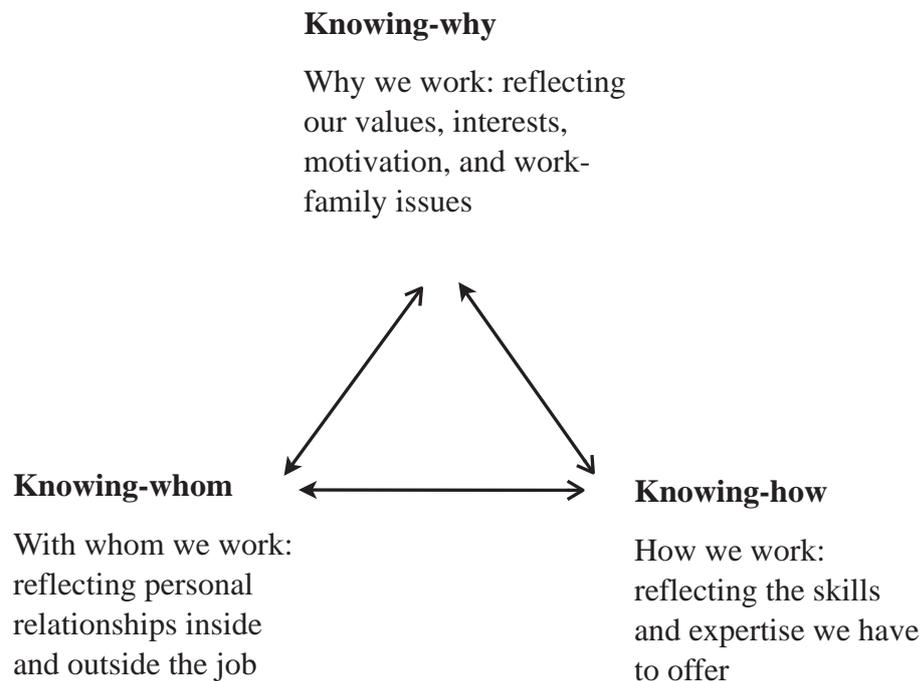


Figure 2.1. The Intelligent Career: Interplay among Three Ways of Knowing (Parker et al., 2009, p. 293).

perception (knowing-why) on how to conduct certain tasks (knowing-how). Hence, the three ways of knowing are not isolated and work together to form complex career outcomes. The dynamic features of career suggest it is the overall interaction between these three forms of knowing (what happens), rather than the individual elements (what is), that shape the makeup of individuals' careers.

Another reason for using career capital as the analytical construct is it recognises and accommodates the validity of external influences on their careers. This is important to any study that focuses on the Chinese context where institutional influences can be significant for individuals.

2.8 Theoretical and Methodological Approaches used in IA Research

There is an emerging interest in international career in the literature due to changing economic structures, technology evolutions and globalisation of the last two decades. However, understanding of careers in the international context is still under-developed (Bonache, Brewster, Suutari, & de Saá, 2010). An intensive literature review on global careers suggest that the central enquiry is the success or effectiveness of the IA (Hemmasi et al., 2010). While there are numerous studies exploring this from different perspectives (for example, from motivation, experience or career perspectives, as outlined previously), the IA literature has often been criticised for lacking theoretical substance (e.g., Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Collings et al., 2009; Dowling, Welch, & Schuler, 1999). IA success is complex and an individual's definition of IA success can be different to that of the organisation (Suutari & Brewster, 2003; Yan et al., 2002).

A multi-disciplinary theoretical approach is therefore required to fully understand the complexity of the IA (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009). More specifically, while individual-level factors have been identified as key determinants in the linkages between IA and career outcomes, organisational and social-level variables are not often

taken into consideration. The first generation of IA research has been mono-theoretical, heavily reliant on description. However, in recent years, there seem to be signs that more integrative, eclectic approaches involving a variety of theoretical views such as neo-institutional (Jones, 2001), resource-based (Taylor, Schon, & Napier, 1996) and social capital (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001) perspectives begin to emerge (De Cieri et al., 2007). Researchers take multiple theories to investigate different aspects of the same phenomenon understanding possible interrelationships between factors. This study takes this research direction considering an IA as a multi-dimensional event involving inputs from both individual assignees and their organisations. It also uses multiple theories such as career capital, context of career development, individual motivations to understand the underlining interrelationships between factors.

Second, research on international careers has been dominated by the question of the career impacts of IAs following repatriation (Bonache et al., 2010). Within the literature, the widely emerging view is that the repatriation stage is very challenging and may even be the most critical part of the IA cycle due to the possible reverse cultural shock or difficulties with job arrangements (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Bossard & Peterson, 2005). MNCs often do not succeed in providing suitable jobs with high-level autonomy, responsibility, or role direction after repatriation (Linehan & Scullion, 2001), or do not provide sufficient support for planning repatriates' future career directions (Dickmann & Harris, 2005). As a result, many international assignees actively seek alternative opportunities even before repatriation. While it is important to understand what can be done better in terms of repatriation management to reduce the post-

assignment turnover rate, it is more important to understand these issues before repatriation takes place. Hence, this study examines those assignees who are experiencing an IA and their perceptions of issues and challenges understanding important factors for a successful IA so that MNCs can implement integrated and consistent international human resource management practices to assist international assignees from start to end.

In terms of methodological approaches in IA research, studies continue to be dominated by survey-based quantitative methods (Bonache et al., 2010). Much of this research attempts to investigate quantifiable relationships between variables based on existing theoretical frameworks such as the career capital model. While surveys are effective in gathering large quantities of statistical data which may help researchers gain an overview of critical issues, there is now a call for more use of qualitative interpretive methods such as interviews and case studies, acknowledging the notion of the individual as an active player in IAs (Jokinen, 2010). Similarly, in a review article on global managers, Tarique and Schuler (2010) suggest that because the field of global career is relatively young, qualitative methodologies may be used along with non-qualitative methods such as surveys to facilitate theory building.

Lastly, the IA literature is dominated by studies on expatriate managers, or more recently, 'global managers' and executives (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010). This is not surprising as a key organisational motive (at least for Western MNCs) of using IA is management development (McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010; Stahl &

Cerdin, 2004). However, as discussed earlier, the emergence of MNCs from less familiar countries such as those from China, means their strategic focuses might be different, and deploy more diverse types of international assignees. Hence, it is necessary to investigate international assignees with a range of different IA tasks. In an attempt to address this issue, this proposed study includes participants with different job positions (e.g., technical and functional) to understand their experiences during an IA.

2.9 Summary

This chapter has reviewed the literature, identifying some of the major contributions in understanding IAs. Key features in the literature have been reviewed including motivation, experience and career perspectives, and outlining the current development in each area of interest.

Even though the literature is extensive and expands across a broad range of themes, further work remains. In particular, it seems important to find ways of moving towards a more multi-dimensional, integrated approach to the study of IAs. Research to date is also dominated by research in Western contexts and there is a need to explore MNCs and their employees from emerging economies. Moreover, given the dominance of large-scale quantitatively based studies there is room for more qualitative research approaches. The ensuing study addresses these key gaps by using a multi-dimensional framework, a qualitative approach and an under-researched sample of Chinese international assignees.

Having explored the theoretical background of the study, the next chapter reviews the specific context of this study: China and Chinese MNCs.

Chapter Three

Literature: Chinese MNCs And Assignees

There is no greater delight than to be conscious of sincerity on self-examination.

-- Mencius

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter established that, to date, scholarship relating to IAs has focused primarily on Western MNCs. It is clear that the IA experiences of international assignees from emerging economies deserve further attention (Cooke, 2009). An exploration of the Chinese context is now required, to help set the backdrop of this study. In this chapter, China's specific social and institutional background is reviewed, particularly in light of how it is related to the research objectives. The published research relating to Chinese careers, organisational practices and cultural characteristics is reviewed to gain an understanding of this limited academic field. In particular, research from Chinese management journals and publications provides a new perspective and identifies current thinking from within China.

3.2 Chinese MNCs

The setting of this study of Chinese international assignees is within Chinese MNCs. The growing international recognition of Chinese MNCs was triggered by the

acceleration of overseas expansion between the end of the 1990s and early 2000s. Particularly, since China's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, Chinese MNCs' international participation has grown in both scope and speed (Kwan, 2006). According to UNCTAD's World Investment Report 2012, China's foreign direct investment outflow has grown from \$2.195 billion in 2000 to \$65 billion in 2011, an increase in excess of 30-times. The growth of China's foreign direct investment activities is also evidenced in the presence of Chinese MNCs. For example, in 2012, 11 Chinese MNCs were ranked among the top 100 non-financial MNCs from developing countries with five in 2004 and only three in 2000 (UNCTAD, 2012).

One important and special characteristic of Chinese MNCs is that most are state-owned enterprises (SOEs). As of the end of 2011, there were more than 16,000 Chinese enterprises investing in 178 countries and regions, establishing cumulative foreign direct investments of US\$ 233.97 billion dollars (Ministry of Commerce, National Bureau of Statistics, & The State Administration of Foreign Exchange, 2012). Among these companies, 69.6% are SOEs and another 20.1% have some levels of involvement from the Government (for example, through joint-stock and collective cooperation) and only 1% are defined as private-owned enterprises. Chinese companies often have hybrid shareholding structures that involve substantial ownership by a variety of national, provincial and local governments, mixed together with publicly listed shares and equity held by management. This not only reflects the institutional feature of Chinese foreign direct investment but also explains differences of Chinese MNCs. State interests provide many of the leading Chinese companies with competitive advantages such as relatively

favourable funding from state-owned banks. Chinese MNCs have also benefitted from access to hard assets, capital and governmental legislative support (Haley & Haley, 2013; Williamson & Zeng, 2009).

Another related characteristic is the nature of the unique institutional system in which they are embedded. While many scholars agree that China is transforming (or has largely transformed) towards capitalism (Chen, 2008; Guthrie, 1999), it follows a different trajectory than that of Western market economies, whether ‘coordinated’ or ‘liberal’ (Hall & Soskice, 2001). McNally (2008) argues that China is developing a unique form of capitalism which blends standard Western features with aspects of its historical and socialist heritage. Other researchers argue that China’s capitalist transition is incomplete due to the partial nature of market reforms (Chen, 2008) or the blurred borderlines between corporate and government sectors (Williamson & Zeng, 2008).

The national institutional framework, based on deep-seated cultural and historical factors as well as ongoing political and economic ones, helps to shape the evolution of organisational, managerial and human resource practices and consequently individual behaviours within organisations (Hasan, Wachtel, & Zhou, 2009). As most Chinese MNCs are SOEs or directly/indirectly controlled by the Government, they serve as a part of the Chinese Government’s international strategic plan. Direct governmental interests have significant influence on how these Chinese MNCs conduct their businesses in foreign countries. Hence, the characteristics of Chinese MNCs are related to the specific context of China.

3.3 Context

Indeed, context is essential for meaning-making because it provides background information that explains experiences and actions of both companies and individuals (Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). Broadly, IA can be seen as a complex and dynamic interaction between the person and the environment such as the organisational and social context (Chen, 2006). Individual perceptions of IA experiences and career activities are subject to influences from conditions and situations surrounding the very experiences of individuals.

The person-environment interrelationship and the significance of context in an international experience have both been addressed by different constructivist approaches and contextual perspectives. Bronfenbrenner (1979) classifies these environments to different systems composing a micro-system (personal and family factors), meso-system (interactions between roles of work and families), exo-system (organisational factors) and macro-system (social factors such as culture, sub-cultures), arguing that these systems directly and indirectly affect career development. Similarly, and more recently, Briscoe, Hall, and Mayrhofer (2012) propose that individuals develop their careers across personal, organisational and social domains and that career development depends on how career competencies are functioned within different contexts. In the Chinese context, Wong and Horng, Cheng, and Killman (2011) provide a summary of contextual factors, including individual differences, job characteristics, and organisational practices, which they believe have an effect on employees' career development.

With a specific focus on the organisational context of careers, Chen, Wakabayashi and Takeuchi (2004) find that several organisational factors, including the quality of the environment for career progress, performance-based promotion practices and in-house training opportunities, have influences on managerial career progression. Further, in the specific Chinese social settings, Wong's (2005) findings indicate how cultural specificity and political dynamics affect managers' career experience, and how government and economic policies, and family expectations act as significant factors determining Chinese career choices. There is no doubt these studies offer some insight into Chinese organisations and their employees, and improve understanding of the differences between the Chinese and Western contexts. However, they provide little evidence on how Chinese international assignees develop their careers given the cross-cultural nature of IAs. Further, most focus on a single perspective of the context such as an individual, organisational or social view. There is no research investigating the overall contextual environment incorporating various domains. Developing careers from IAs involves not only physical movements to different organisational and cultural locations but also mobility across personal and psychological domains. The current study therefore takes an overall approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of international assignees' careers. With the growth of Chinese MNCs, the role of international assignees is becoming more important and understanding how these members of the Chinese elite develop their careers becomes a critical topic. Two significant features of the Chinese context which have emerged through the research are its institutional and cultural background. These shape organisational practices and influence individual behaviours.

3.3.1 Institutional Factors

The most significant institutional feature of China is its political system which is dominated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Under the one party policy, the Communist Party has absolute power over all levels of decision making. While the Government claims that the Chinese economy has been transformed from a 'planned economy' to a 'market economy', control from the Government over its economic development remains tight (Claver & Quer, 2005). Governmental policies and regulations affect all business activities and this is evidenced in Chinese MNCs. As mentioned in Section 3.2, most Chinese MNCs are SOEs or are directly or indirectly controlled by the Government, serving as part of the Chinese Government's international strategic plan. Direct governmental interests have significant influence on how these Chinese MNCs conduct their businesses in foreign countries (Edwards, 2008). This is useful in explaining organisational motives of using IAs. Chinese MNCs do not tend to focus on the development of global managers from international tasks, and the influence of Western ideas and managerial practices may be threatening to the core ideology and the tight control of central government (Hsu, 2008).

China's institutional context also affects individual behaviours. The official Marxist philosophy of the CCP is also strongly influenced by Confucianism, which emphasises collective harmony and hierarchy (Friedman, 1995). The CCP has ruled for more than half a century so these beliefs, which are also firmly established in Chinese people's value systems, affect how they perceive their roles within organisations and society. Further, careers are bounded by these influences. Governmental bureaucracy is still a

significant part of the organisational hierarchy and directly influences human resource practices such as selection and promotion (Shen, 2006). For example, in many SOEs, networks (*guanxi*) play an important role in the selection process and it is often not individuals' technical skills but their social networks which determine promotions and therefore career development (Zheng & Lamond, 2009). While these institutional factors seem to be relevant in predicting Chinese assignees' motives and perceptions regarding an IA, there is as yet little evidence in the academic literature.

3.3.2 Cultural Factors

One of the most used theoretical approaches for cultural studies has been based on the comparisons between constructs of individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). Compared to Western countries such as the USA and the UK, China is considered as a country with a collectivistic orientation which is rooted in Confucianism (McNaughton, 1974; Wong, 2005). The core of Confucian philosophy emphasises 'the importance of controlling for selfish and greedy behaviours and the importance of spontaneous behaviours that are beyond the explicit role requirements but essential for the society' (Rotundo & Xie, 2009, p. 88). Lockett (1988) summarises key Confucius principles as (1) harmony, (2) collectivism, (3) the importance of interpersonal relationships, and (4) respect for hierarchy. In a collectivistic culture such as China (Alon, 2003), individual actions are influenced by social factors and their decisions are characterised by attitudes that favour interdependencies, harmony and personalised relationships (Hofstede, 2001). Collectivism is also reflected from the CCP's

philosophy which emphasises equal contribution to societal and group welfare, and concern for interpersonal relationships (Lai & Lam, 1986). Hofstede (1980, 1991), Goldenberg (1988) and Adler (2001) all concur that Confucian principles are the dominant input into the programming of Chinese employees' minds. For example, Chinese workers tend to be more responsive to group goals and group-based performance incentives than Americans (Søndergaard, 1994). Chinese workers' behaviours are evaluated and shaped with the aim of maintaining smooth interpersonal relations and harmonious organisational environments. Also, they tend to avoid conflict within the group and use positive ways to express their dissatisfaction (Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, & Terpstra, 1993). As a result, Chinese employees' behaviours such as career decision-making are not only driven by personal desires but must also conform to familial and societal expectations (Mau, 2000) in keeping with the collective cultural influence. Their decisions are strongly affected by the values and norms of the groups to which that they belong. It is logical, therefore, to conclude that career mobility for Chinese people is, to a large extent, mediated by cultural influences.

Confucian principles also influence individual perceptions of their roles within an organisation. Chan (2008) contends that Chinese employees are more loyal, submissive and sensitive to hierarchical order and harmonious interpersonal relationships (Bond & Hwang, 1986). They focus on the mutual benefits of social exchange and avoid any direct conflict with co-workers. Consequently, Chinese employees are less likely to promote themselves to others or to speak against others.

Two specific Chinese cultural norms are associated with maintaining mutual relationships. The first is face (*mianzi*) which acts as a mechanism to protect the social system by maintaining harmonious interactions between people (Tian & Cone, 2003). The other is *guanxi* which refers to ‘the network of informal relationships within a social group or, at an individual level, to a particular individual’s informal relationship ties with other individuals within this social group’ (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006, p. 1535).

Guanxi literally means interpersonal relationships (Su & Littlefield, 2001) or good connections (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006), describing the basic dynamic in personalised networks of influence. Chinese enhance their networks (*guanxiwang*) by offering favours to others, who, in turn, are obliged to return these favours in order to maintain the network. People perceive it as ‘gaining face’ (*gei mianzi*) if they are offered favours from others. Contrarily, they ‘lose face’ (*diu mianzi*) if their favours are not returned or even if their offers of favours are refused. Chinese *guanxi* is based on informal, particularistic personal connections between two individuals who are bound by an implicit psychological contract (Chen, Chen, & Meindl, 1998).

These Chinese cultural characteristics have significant implications in this study and raise several key matters that are related to the research questions. If *guanxi* is important for Chinese assignees, what is its role during an IA? For example, does it play an important part in gaining the IA opportunity in the first place? How do assignees perceive the relevance of *guanxi* in a Western cultural context? How these cultural

features influence assignees' IA experiences and subsequent career development? These questions are addressed in this study with a contribution to not only the limited empirical evidence on Chinese assignees but also the notion of contextual understanding of career development (Briscoe et al., 2012).

3.4 Chinese Careers

Research on Chinese careers is rare with a handful of studies exploring the Chinese domestic workers' career experiences (e.g., Granrose, 2007; Lau, Shaffer, & Au, 2007; Pang, 2003). These studies however, offer some valuable insights to understanding important issues for Chinese workers and more importantly, identifying key research gaps that are relevant for this study. The review of Chinese careers is organised in the following manner: first, changing career patterns are discussed with consideration of China's historical, economic and social factors. Key themes from the academic literature are then outlined identifying key research gaps. Finally, Chinese careers are put into the context of IAs with a specific focus on assignees' career capital development.

3.4.1 Changing Patterns

The Chinese employment system was once characterised by life-time employment, an egalitarian wage structure, state-controlled job allocation and rigid rural-urban and worker-to-cadre dichotomies (Briscoe et al., 2012; Warner, 2004; Wong, 2007; Zhao & Zhou, 2004). As a result, early Chinese careers were defined by what was called the

'three old irons' (*jiu santie*), that is, the pillars of life-time employment (the 'iron rice bowl', *tie fanwan*), centrally administered wages (the 'iron wage', *tie gongzi*), and state-controlled appointments and promotion of managerial staff (the 'iron chair', *tie jiaoyi*) (Ng & Warner, 1998). Each SOE was in effect a 'company town' and it provided all employees' needs over their entire career (Shen & Edwards, 2004, p. 198). When employees retired, they passed their positions onto the next generation and the employment cycle replicated itself (Garnaut & Song, 2004). Job allocations were centrally planned and administered by the Government (Chow, Fung, & Nog, 1999). An individual worker did not have the right to choose their job, and their career simply represented the individual's contribution to communism and social improvement (Tu, Forret, & Sullivan, 2006). This early (pre-1990) type of Chinese career is well acknowledged in the literature, particularly in relation to SOEs because of their dominant positions in China (Warner, 2004).

Since the late 1990s, the fast-changing economic and social landscape in China caused significant shifts in employment structures. The boom of private and foreign-invested enterprises, as well as the poor performance of many SOEs, has made working in the state sector no longer socially desirable and opportunities for career development have diversified. This has triggered a shift of career focus from both individuals and organisations. Attracting and maintaining talent has become a challenging task. Organisations have begun to recognise the importance of human capital, and now adopt human resource practices focusing on personal development and job satisfaction (Warner, 2004). From an individual perspective, personal competencies and skills have

become important factors in seeking employment and promotion (Ding, Goodall, & Warner, 2000), with much more emphasis on one's educational background (Bjorkman & Lu, 2000).

Although the changing career patterns seem to meet the claims of a boundaryless career because individuals have more freedom on their career choices, the transition to true individual agency is not complete. CCP membership and college education are important for promotion along the administrative lines of SOEs, while education is much more critical for promotion along the professional line and within private-owned enterprises (Zhao & Zhou, 2004). Different organisational focus, structures and cultures result in different practices within Chinese organisations regarding career development and opportunities.

Another significant theme in the Chinese career literature is the impact of demographic trends on career orientation. Career values are shifting among different generations as China progresses. The 'social reform generation' (1977 to the present) attributes significantly higher importance to openness to change, in comparison to earlier 'cultural revolution generation' which emphasises self-enhancement featuring achievement, hedonism and power (Egri & Ralston, 2004). In a more specific segment, the term 'after-80 generation' is used to refer to those who were born between 1980 and 1989 in urban areas of Mainland China when the one-child policy was implemented. This generation, which is also referred to as China's generation Y (Stanat, 2005), has been exposed to fast economic growth and intensified globalisation, significant social change

and a great focus upon university education. This compares with their parents, who had experienced the cultural revolution during which economic development was stagnant and education was greatly discredited. Generation Y's more entrepreneurial and individualistic values orientations indicate the dramatic organisational changes in a competitive market-based economy in China (Egri & Ralston, 2004; Yu & Qu, 2007). Their definitions of career success are more diversified compared to older groups who value objective career achievements such as job security, and have little concern for subjective success such as personal growth, social working environments and learning opportunities (Briscoe, Hall, & Mayrhofer, 2012).

3.4.2 Key Themes from the Academic Literature

In terms of theoretical development, career outcomes and choices are two emergent topics in the literature on Chinese careers. Research is limited and mainly exploratory, however, attempts have been made to test the applicability of existing theories that have been developed within the Western context. Career outcomes have been operationalised in both objective and subjective terms with constructs such as monetary income (Wong, 2005), promotion (Zhao & Zhou, 2004), job satisfaction (Loi & Ngo, 2010), social reputation, recognition, and status (Lau et al., 2007) used to define career success in the Chinese context. Career competencies and anchors (Wong, 2007) are used to examine the development patterns of Chinese careers (Yu & Qu, 2007) and their career decision-making styles (Gati, Landman, Davidovitch, Asulin-Peretz, & Gadassi, 2010). Among these studies, the importance of context has been repeatedly highlighted. Although also

identified in Western literature, the uniqueness of the Chinese context adds further complexity to the understanding of career development patterns. Chinese elements such as guanxi (Bozionelos & Wang, 2006; Wei, Liu, Chen, & Wu, 2010), organisational culture (Chen et al., 2004; Ke & Morris, 2002) and political influences (Li & Walder, 2001; Wei et al., 2010) are important and sometimes dominate individual career development. In a collectivist society like China, objective career success, comprising social reputation, recognition, and status, is an important part of the criterion space that has been ignored or downplayed in previous (mostly Western) studies (Heslin, 2005). Such social appraisals of career success are particularly important in view of Chinese cultural characteristics. According to Yu (1996), Chinese achievement motivation includes a dynamic tendency to reach externally determined goals or standards of excellence in a socially approved way.

3.4.3 Chinese Careers in the IA Literature

Understanding of individual motives for accepting IAs among Chinese international assignees is limited in the academic literature. The small number of studies which do exist suggest that, while Chinese international assignees have similar motivations for accepting IAs, financial benefits are likely to be key because of the significant salary difference between domestic work and the IA (Shen & Edwards, 2004) allowing for an improvement in personal and family living standards. The total package received overseas can amount to three or four times of the domestic rate (Shen, 2006). Chinese international assignees also expect positive impacts on their career development.

Language skills, advanced technical skills and the international experience itself, are all important factors for Chinese workers to progress within or between organisations (Wong, 2005). This latter factor is of particular importance in today's Chinese labour market where a growing number of Chinese companies desire qualified workers to fulfill their international strategies.

Compared to Western MNCs, Chinese MNCs do not commonly support the international assignees' spouse and children on IAs (Shen & Edwards, 2006) because companies often consider family-related issues such as dual-career couples and children's education the international assignees' own responsibility. This underlines the issues of international assignee adjustment (Takeuchi, 2010). Unlike Western MNCs in which international assignee failure is often a result of spouse or children adjustment difficulties (Lee, 2007), Chinese international assignees often face personal challenges that are associated with being away from families (Selmer, Ebrahimi, & Li, 2000). Cultural differences between China and IA destinations may affect international assignees' willingness to integrate into the new environment. Although Chinese MNCs do not provide training regarding international assignee adjustment (Shen & Darby, 2006), research shows lower IA failure rates. In Chinese MNCs, the rate is four per cent, which is lower than that of the USA, Japanese and some European MNCs (six per cent) (Shen & Edwards, 2006). The major reason for such low failure rates appears to be that Chinese assignees cherish the opportunity to work abroad because of the financial benefits and possible promotional opportunities even with the sacrifices of being away from home. Potential career benefits from IAs are thus possible reasons but little is

written on this area. However, it is possible to engage this limited literature in terms of the three forms of career capital, comparing it to 'Western' expectations.

Knowing-how Career Capital

As discussed earlier, knowing-how career capital includes skills and competencies obtained from IAs. As China enters the global market, Chinese companies have urgent needs for the latest technologies, international market knowledge and developed managerial skills. However, Wong (2005) claims that, unlike most Western MNCs, Chinese companies are unaware of the importance of IAs on the development of management and lack commitment to international assignees' career planning and development. Chinese human resource functions mainly focus on ensuring employees do their jobs in accordance with organisational expectations, and thus is more of a control factor than a developmental one (Kohonen, 2005, Oddou, Mendenhall, & Ritchie, 2000). As Shen and Edwards (2006, p. 67) succinctly state: 'Chinese employees are trained to take orders, not to initiate changes'. Consequently, the primary purpose of IAs is the development of technical and functional skills that are organisation-oriented.

Chinese assignees are often given IAs to complete short, temporary, technical tasks to fulfill organisational operational goals (Shen, 2006). Although Chinese international assignees are likely to develop certain new knowing-how capital, some skills are not transferable to host organisations (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Bonache, Brewster, & Suutari, 2001; Dickmann et al., 2008) and are therefore lost to both the individual and the organisation. Language skills, for example, may be culture-specific and may not be

relevant in the home country, or the home organisations may not have tasks for international assignees to utilise their new skills. Chinese international assignees are sometimes reassigned abroad immediately and they need to repackage their know-how capital to suit the new environment. Their new capital may not be relevant to the new task and may become obsolete. Even after returning to the home country, in many cases, repatriates are given unchallenging or ill-defined positions, with low levels of authority and autonomy (Shen & Darby, 2006). This is in line with the findings in Western literature which suggests difficulties of job arrangement upon repatriation (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). However unlike the evidence on Western assignees which suggests that IAs are good for individuals in the long-term as (Western) organisations value competencies such as flexibility, adaptability and learning capacity (Suutari & Brewster, 2003), it is unclear about the impacts of IAs on Chinese assignees' long term career progression.

The unique political and cultural factors of China are also likely to have an impact on Chinese organisational orientation and practices concerning IAs (Hempel, 2001). Although Chinese companies crave Western knowledge and technologies, they are still conservative in the adoption of Western managerial theories because of cultural and political differences (Bjorkman, 2002). Also, centralised hierarchical organisational structures enable tighter control from top management. Instead of developing international assignees' managerial skills in the Western context, Chinese organisations tend to focus on gathering skills and knowledge that are easily adopted within the Chinese culture (Alon, 2003).

Knowing-why career capital

Knowing-why career capital, which includes people's identity, value, self-awareness and personal growth, are also influenced from IAs (Richardson & Mallon, 2005). Chinese international assignees are likely to suffer the same challenges such as homesickness and cultural shock at being in a different environment as are Western assignees. However, they are unlikely to have training programmes and ongoing support to mitigate these effects (Shen & Edwards, 2004). Given the collectivist society Chinese international assignees come from, they are more likely to accept an IA as part of what is 'right for the greater good', such as the potential benefits to the whole family (Shen & Darby, 2006; Zhao, 2008). They also value the opportunities as a reflection of organisational recognition of their performance and this pride may outweigh some of the difficulties of IAs.

Further, the desire for harmony rooted in the Chinese culture means that an international assignee would not articulate their concerns about taking an IA, and would prioritise the needs of the organisation over their personal concerns. Once they have been selected, a candidate has little or no choice to refuse the assignment (Shen & Edwards, 2006). The risk of 'losing face' and damaging *guanxi* within the organisation is a major deterrent.

According to Western scholarship, the experience of living and working abroad can result in beneficial changes in motivation, identity and personal expectations of the career (Jokinen et al., 2008). Individuals may look for more challenges to fit their newly developed skills and they expect recognition from the organisation for their

development. However, Chinese international assignees understand that climbing up the corporate ladder within organisations is more likely to result from other technical, bureaucratic and social factors. The international experience, of itself, is less likely to realise advancement within an organisation.

Knowing-whom Career Capital

Knowing-whom capital is recognised as one of the most important resources for job performance and career development (Cross & Cummings, 2004; Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Lin, 2001). People who have extensive network contacts are more likely to have access to promotions and new job opportunities. In the Chinese context, *guanxi* plays a significant part in the international assignee selection process with pressure to select employees who have good relationships with senior managers, rather than being technically or functionally qualified for the IA (Shen, 2006).

Furthermore, building relationships in China requires greater willingness and effort to be involved in the personal and social lives of others as well as allowing others to be involved in one's own non-work life (Fan, 2002). Such involvement extends well beyond the domain of the workplace to include interactions over meals and drinks, at each other's homes and recreational events. Hence, the overlap between work and social relations is much more pervasive in the Chinese context than in the West (Yg & Huo, 1993). In other words, there are no clear boundaries between business and personal benefits and the development of *guanxi* is thus reinforced through a long, complex process, involving two individuals investing in mutual relationships and expecting

reciprocation (in both subjective and objective terms) over time. Once guanxi is developed, it is difficult to damage even if one party is abroad because this form of friendship network is built on the psychological and socio-emotional elements (Wong & Slater, 2002). This is contrary to some of the Western literature arguing that IAs may potentially damage international assignees' knowing-whom career capital due to physical distance (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004; Stroh, Gregersen, & Black, 2000). Furthermore, Chinese international assignees, may have difficulties developing guanxi in the host country due to significant differences in culture and language. Enhanced business networks in the host country may assist them in their job, but it is difficult to maintain these contacts over time. Those on short-term assignments may not develop contacts in the host country at all.

Overall, while the points made above provide some valuable insights to understanding Chinese international assignees' career capital development, they are mainly 'logical assumptions' based on studies of Chinese organisational practices, culture and social environment. There is no empirical knowledge on how Chinese assignees develop their careers during an IA. This current study therefore proposes to fill this gap by contributing empirical evidence to current knowledge of career capital integrating China's social, cultural and organisational characteristics.

3.5 A Review of the Chinese Literature on Careers and IAs

The limited understanding of Chinese IAs and assignees are not only reflected in 'Western' literature as discussed previously, but also remain under-developed in China's academic research domain. Wright, back in 1988, argued that Chinese researchers

take very little notice of the work of other scholars either inside or outside China, as a result, a more systematic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary Chinese management ... and the creation of a management which is both modern and Chinese would be problematic, if not entirely impossible. (p. 214)

Little appears to have changed today. Language remains the major barrier for international access to home-grown local Chinese research, but another important factor is the different focus, methodology and intellectual approach of Chinese human resource management research (Peng, Lu, Shenkar, & Wang, 2001). The academic development of Chinese human resource management research is in its infancy. There is little doubt, however, that a rising emphasis on the importance of education and research, will lead to a growing and authoritative contribution to international as well as domestic literature. Such a move will be facilitated by more co-operation between scholars inside and outside China (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007).

A feature of the Western literature regarding Chinese international human resource management, is that no review has been conducted of Chinese management publications. A review of Chinese literature was therefore performed to provide a different and more complete perspective on human resource research. To address this

shortcoming, an initial search of selected journals was carried out, via the China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database (CAJD). Keywords used were: 中国跨国公司 (Chinese MNCs), 职业 (career), 外派工作 (international assignments) and 外派人员 (international assignees) in the citation and abstract, following the approach adopted by Cooke (2009) and Zheng and Lamond (2009). Although the aim was to gather empirical research only, the search found that the majority of papers do not fit the Western definition of empirical research. It was not the intention in this research to criticise Chinese publications from a Western perspective. Rather, it aimed to look at the development of Chinese research with an open mind and find out what can be utilised for the purpose of this study. Therefore, all publications using these keywords were accessed to identify major themes and research trends listed under the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI). Table 3.1 is the CSSCI 2011 (management category). The index was developed by Nanjing University in 1998 and includes more than 2,700 Chinese academic journals of social sciences published since 2000. While CSSCI is still in its development stage and contains a relatively small number of publications, it is often used by many leading Chinese universities as a basis for evaluation of academic achievements. Hence, it is important to initiate a systematic review on the current status of Chinese research.

The search found 37 articles mentioning the keywords. The themes that arise from the literature are summarised in following sections. Because of the distinctions previously mentioned, and so as not to distract from the main research objectives of this study, these articles (in Chinese) are not included in the reference list and footnotes are used to

Table 3.1.

Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) (Management Category)

<i>Ranking</i>	<i>Journal Name in Chinese</i>	<i>Journal Name in English</i>
1	管理世界	Management World Magazine
2	中国软科学	China Soft Science Magazine
3	科研管理	Science Research Management
4	科学学研究	Studies in Science of Science
5	南开管理评论	National Business Review
6	管理科学学报	Journal of Management Sciences in China
7	外国经济与管理	Foreign Economics and Management
8	研究与发展管理	Research and Development Management
9	科学学与科学技术管理	The Science of Science and the Science and Technology Management
10	中国管理科学	Chinese Journal of Management Science
11	管理工程学报	Journal of industrial Engineering and Engineering Management
12	管理科学	Journal of Management Sciences
13	管理评论	Management Review
14	科学管理研究	Scientific Management Research
15	预测	Forecasting
16	中国行政管理	Chinese Public Administration
17	管理学报	Chinese Journal of Management
18	公共管理学报	Journal of Public Management
19	中国科技论坛	Forum on Science and Technology in China
20	软科学	Soft Science
21	科技进步与对策	Science and Technology Progress and Policy
22	经济体制改革	Reform of Economic System
23	经济管理	Economic Management
24	管理现代化	Modernization of Management
25	宏观经济管理	Macroeconomic Management
26	华东经济管理	East China Economic Management

reference articles within the text where necessary. A full list of these Chinese articles are included in Appendix B.

3.5.1 Key Features

Organisational perspectives

An important feature of Chinese academic papers in career and IA research is their strong organisational focus. Human resource management practices regarding recruiting, training and managing international assignees are popularly discussed with specific attention to ‘internationalised practices’¹. Many papers utilise case studies of Western and Japanese MNCs to discuss best practices for Chinese MNCs. Although international human resource management is a new area in China and there are strong demands to learn new practices and skills from Western companies (Cooke, 2009), Chinese scholars acknowledge that not all Western practices can be used in China². Contextual differences are analysed aiming for international human resource management practices ‘with Chinese characteristics’³.

According to a number of sources, Chinese MNCs are characterised as ‘learning organisations’ and considered as at the forefront for gaining international knowledge. Even in such cases, the kind of human resource management to be found is often concerned with short-term issues like wages, welfare and promotion rather than long-

1 The term of ‘internationalised practices’ referring to ‘modern human resource management practices such as those learnt from Western theories, instead of ‘integrated global human resource management practices’. They are discussed in both Lin (2002) and Yang (2005).

2 Lan (2004).

3 e.g., Li and Chen (2008), and Wang (2006). The term of ‘with Chinese characteristics’ (*you zhongguo tese de*) was taken from Deng Xiaoping’s ideological concept of ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ firstly introduced in 1982. It seems that political influences exist in business or management publications.

term strategic ones⁴. These sources are mainly introductory texts which do not offer constructive analysis. They outline the difficulties in managing international assignees including aspects such as the turnover rate, and pay issues. Although all papers use the term 'human resource management', strong characteristics of personnel management such as functional practices of recruitment, training, and pay rolls dominate the Chinese literature. It seems that the strategic focus of international human resource management is not adequately developed among Chinese MNCs or, at least, the significance of international human resource management strategies is not acknowledged in the Chinese literature.

Willingness to Accept an IA

Chinese sources suggest that the majority (over 50%) of Chinese workers are willing to accept IAs with the most significant motivation being potential career benefits⁵. Most Chinese MNCs do not offer comprehensive career development systems within their companies and job security after repatriation remains as a major concern. Further, many Chinese international assignees appreciate the value of international experience and are optimistic about their career outcomes. There is a scarcity of research as to what specific career benefits international assignees gain from IAs.

4 e.g., Lei (2011); Liu (2011); Sun (2009) and Yao (2008).

5 Wen (2007).

Similar to the Western literature, family issues are a significant theme in Chinese sources, and are considered as the most significant reason for refusing IAs⁶. Although compensation and financial benefits are important in the decision-making process, they do not overtake the importance of family factors. Some articles outline the important characteristics of Chinese family and social structure and argue influences from international assignees' partners and parents are an important factor of IA effectiveness⁷. This emphasises the need to link organisational motives with personal needs and call for more organisational support so the negative impacts of family issues can be minimised.

Although family issues are acknowledged, there is insufficient analysis. For example, the demographic characteristics of Chinese international assignees (e.g., young employees without partners or university graduates) are only briefly mentioned in two articles⁸ and neither provides a systematic analysis of how characteristics such as the 'one-child policy' influence international assignees' motivations and experiences.

IA Pay and Benefits

IA salary and benefits are important for attracting workers especially to less desired IA destinations⁹. Chinese MNCs have comprehensive international salary systems. Because most Chinese MNCs are ethnocentric (Fang, 2011), global integration is important to

6 Liu (2005) and Wang (2004).

7 Liu (2011) and Qi (2007)

8 Liu (2007) and Wang (2001).

9 Li and Chen (2008).

ensure equity and control. Chinese international assignees' salary packages typically include base salary, welfare benefits, performance bonuses, and location, living and family allowances¹⁰. Several studies also explain Chinese organisational practices (providing shared accommodation) for supporting international assignees during their IAs¹¹. To maximise job performance, many Chinese MNCs provide assistance to ensure overseas employees' satisfaction regarding living arrangements.

Although the IA packages are often more than the local salary, Chinese research finds that financial remunerations are not the most important benefits international assignees expect from IAs. They are more concerned with job security, development opportunities, and repatriation job arrangements¹². One reason is that Chinese culture has a 'long-term orientation' (Hofstede, 1991) emphasising the need to focus career as a long-term objective.

Guanxi

Guanxi are often discussed in terms of teamwork, effectiveness, learning and harmonious organisations¹³. Western theoretical models such as Leader-Member Exchange (Graen & Bien, 1995) and Team Member Exchange (Anson, 1989) are used to discuss these issues within Chinese MNCs. Criticism is received regarding the

10 Yao (2008).

11 Liu (2011); Qi (2007) and Tang (2011).

12 Wen (2007).

13 Li (2006); Liang (2007) and Wang (2004).

implementation of Western models within the Chinese context¹⁴. Western literature also acknowledges that replicating theories in a distinctive social context may be problematic (Cooke, 2009). Attempts are, however, made to outline and explain unique characteristics of Chinese social capital and how that contributes to one's career.

Although it is likely that *guanxi* plays a significant role in Chinese international assignees' careers, there is no literature exploring this area. *Guanxi* sometimes and at certain levels is considered as 'backdoor' solutions and may have negative meanings (Luo, 1997). Therefore, in academic environments where fairness and openness are often promoted, discussions and analysis on this sensitive issue of personal *guanxi* are avoided. Unlike Western networks which are often divided into work-related and personal-related networks, Chinese *guanxi* has no clear boundaries between work and personal lives. Chinese culture is fundamentally influenced by the concept of family (Sha, 2000). As the smallest unit, family forms the complex Chinese social structure. This is also reflected from Chinese organisational culture in which workers treat companies like their family and expect emotional belongings from their organisations¹⁵. This means relationships between workers go beyond job related networks and involve more emotional attachments and personal contributions (Chua, Morris, & Ingram, 2009; Pun, Chin, & Lau, 2000). The consistent relevance of *guanxi* in Chinese MNCs from both Western and Chinese literature confirms its significance on individual careers. There is therefore an opportunity for the current study to contribute to this conversation

¹⁴ Wang (2004).

¹⁵ Li (2006).

by revealing key issues that are related to assignees' guanxi and its influences on careers.

Cultural Distance

Research on cultural distance covers various aspects of IAs such as IA adjustment, IA training and repatriation¹⁶. Studies outline the importance of cultural adjustment in relation to IA effectiveness while acknowledging that Chinese MNCs do not provide cultural training prior to IAs¹⁷. These researchers also argue that international assignees experience a second cultural adjustment after repatriation. Reverse cultural shock and lack of organisational support often contribute to adjustment difficulties and personal dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, some researchers explore the impact of a different culture on one's career¹⁸. The implementation of existing skills in a new environment can be challenging and culture plays a mediating role that affects individual's knowing-how. Gaining new skills can be also complicated as many of these skills are contextualised and may lose their value when returning to the home country.

16 Wang (2011) and Zhou (2011)

17 An (2002); Bai (2010) and Liu (2011).

18 Lin (2007) and Qin (2008) .

3.5.2 Relevance to This Study

It is important to reiterate that a feature of most of Chinese scholarship is that the publications are brief and descriptive, and that research into IA motivations, experiences or careers is limited. They do, however, enhance the knowledge available through Western published sources in two ways. First, a close reading of Chinese scholarship confirms that research on Chinese international assignees' career development is not only inadequate in the Western literature but also limited in Chinese publications. This calls for some initiatives so career issues can be explored in a diverse setting and the understanding of this under-researched population can be developed. Second, the summary of themes in Chinese literature outlines potential key areas to be explored. Given the acknowledged limitations of Western research concerning Chinese IAs and assignees, it is useful to obtain key information from other avenues. For example, it was learnt from Chinese publications that certain international human resource management practices such as shared-accommodation are common among Chinese MNCs, therefore specific questions regarding the perceived benefits or disadvantages of such practices should be explored in future studies. Also, it was outlined in these publications that Chinese MNCs tend to use young, and in some cases, university graduates for IAs. Hence, future research should incorporate questions focusing on the specific characteristics of young Chinese assignees. It is necessary to consider these articles are important in tandem with primary data to see how international assignees respond to these key themes.

3.6 Summary

A review of the literature on IAs with a specific focus of a Chinese context has identified the career development of international assignees from China as an underdeveloped area. Given the rapid growth of Chinese MNCs, the emergent uses of international human resource management practices, and the uniqueness of cultural norms, it is important to explore the rationale and experience of IAs.

Several key gaps are identified from the literature review, which can be addressed in the study. First, there is limited understanding of Chinese careers, not least of Chinese international assignees. Second, the contextual impacts of IAs on individual motivation, experiences and careers remain insufficient. Thus, it is proposed that this study uses the career capital concept to explore IAs with a contextual perspective. By investigating their motivations and perceptions of the impact of IAs, and the implications for career development, the individual, organisational and social significance of international experience can be explored. Such research's potential contribution is both empirical and conceptual in that it tests the relevance of various theories and concepts in a non-Western context.

The next chapter explains the methodology used in this study. The research method, design and process are addressed with specific focus on research objectives and questions.

Chapter Four

Method

By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is bitterest.

-- Confucius

4.1 Introduction

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this study seeks to examine the effectiveness of IAs from the perspectives of Chinese international assignees. Career capital is the central theoretical construct. The extensive search and review of IA studies has established that surveys are the most commonly used method in IA studies (De Cieri, 2005). Much of this research attempts to investigate causal relationships between variables based on existing theoretical frameworks such as career capital or motivational models. There is however, now a call for more qualitative methods such as interviews, not least because of the relevance of personal perspectives (Glanz, Williams, & Hoeksema, 2001). In a review article on the topic of global managers, Tarique and Schuler (2010) suggest that because the field of global careers is relatively young, qualitative methodologies may be used along with non-qualitative methods such as surveys, to facilitate theory building.

In this chapter, a qualitative methodology is presented as the appropriate approach to interpret narratives of human experience in intercultural contexts consistent with the research question. Associated research objectives are articulated and implementation of the chosen research methods and research design are discussed. Through interpretation of the rich description of international assignees' narrative accounts of their experiences, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the value of IA and how it affects individual well-being.

4.2 Research Philosophy

A discussion of research philosophy is important as it underpins the choice of research strategy for this study, and underlines 'how we understand social reality, and what are the most appropriate ways of studying it' (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2001, p. 59). Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) argue that philosophical issues are central to the notion of a practical research design as they help researchers to clarify the area of investigation, recognise which designs will work and which will not, and identify designs that may be outside their experience. The research objectives for this study of Chinese international assignees focus on perceptions and experience. They seek to discover participants' interpretations of their time living and working in a foreign country. As such, the research fits with that of scholars who argue a need for subjective appreciation of social phenomenon encouraging researchers to 'put mind back in the picture' based on an ontology of truth and a subjectivist epistemology in which meaning is personally or socially constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the phenomenological paradigm, or,

more broadly, a range of approaches labelled interpretive (Gill & Johnson, 1997) or as interpretivism (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 1985), reality is socially constructed; people interpret their social roles according to the meaning they give to these roles, and interpret the social roles of others in accordance with the same set of meanings.

Phenomenology is also relevant to this research undertaking as it is concerned with meaning, and the design of a study can evolve as the researcher reacts to the material that is uncovered. This is particularly so for researchers who are interested in the qualitative, rich description of how people think, react and feel under contextually-specific situations. In a phenomenological paradigm, research is more than mechanical fact gathering, and the understanding that emerges is a product of the interaction between the researcher and the phenomenon under investigation (Turner, 1981). A phenomenologist enters the social world of the research subjects to try to understand their world from their point of view (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009), an undertaking which in this study, is partly enabled by the researcher's own Chinese cultural embeddedness. The research itself, in fact, is a product of socially- and historically-mediated human consciousness (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Underpinning this study is a phenomenological paradigm. This paradigm drives the research question, context of research and, more importantly, personal philosophical beliefs about the nature of the world (Merriam, 1998). In particular, this paradigm acknowledges that Chinese international assignees are likely to seek, define and redefine their social roles based on their own understandings of their international

experience. For example, from a career perspective of an IA, while objective career measurements such as salaries and job positions are important, they are reflected as success only when they are filtered through an individual's mind. This was also why the research questions in this study have focused on *perceived* career development of individuals. Instead of measuring Chinese international assignees' objective achievements, this study was interested in their own interpretations of their IA motivation, experience and career outcomes in both subjective and objective terms.

The multi-dimensional nature of this study consists of motivations, experiences and career capital, also calls for a more in-depth analysis of social behaviours. It does not aim to test or theorise definite laws or hypotheses in the same way as the physical sciences. Instead, this study aims to understand the phenomenon of Chinese IAs in Western contexts by developing rich insights into personal perceptions. This approach recognises that not only are Chinese international assignees' experiences complex, they are unique. They are a function of a particular set of circumstances and individuals coming together at a specific time. Furthermore, since this study is exploratory in nature, it was not the intention to generate propositions that can be applied to a wider population, though it was concerned to help define theoretical concepts and develop a research agenda for further work.

4.3 Research Approach

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson and Lowe (2008) suggest three reasons why a self-aware and articulated research approach is important:

- It enables a more informed decision about the research design.
- It helps researchers to understand both advantages and disadvantages of research strategies and choices.
- It helps researchers to adapt a research design to cater for constraints.

Governed by the exploratory nature of the inquiry, and the underpinning phenomenological inquiry, this study adopted an inductive, qualitative and narrative approach. Since it considered the topic of Chinese international assignees' perceptions and motivations, it was appropriate to work inductively by generating qualitative data and analysing and reflecting upon what the data suggests in terms of concepts or theoretical themes. In line with the emphasis on a phenomenological philosophy, an inductive approach aims to gain an understanding of the meanings humans attach to events through the researcher's social lens. It requires researchers to be open-minded and flexible in the process of research and to concentrate on explanations rather than standardised systematic comparisons between variables.

Interpretative, qualitative data deal with meanings. Meanings are constructed in terms of an inter-subjective language which allows us to communicate intelligibly and interact effectively (Sayer, 1992). Meaning is essentially a matter of making distinctions. For example, this study investigated international assignees' motivations for accepting an IA. It compares different personal motivations, determines the connections between these factors and explains how and why these connections have an impact on the individual decision-making process. Meanings reside in social practice, and not just in

the heads of individuals (Dey, 1993). Understanding both IAs and careers involves unfolding the meaning of international experiences in a particular social setting and analysing the interactions between the individual actors' interpretations of their (career) actions and the organisational and social context in which they were constituted (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Narratives are used to understand social meanings and how people construct their reality and give meaning to past life (Polkinghorne, 1988). The present study has adopted Polkinghorne's (1988, p. 18) definition of a narrative as: 'a meaningful structure that organises events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole'. A narrative is generally told in the wake of some significant experience, such as an IA. Due to their significance, such narratives are carefully stored in the mind and frequently retold. The narrative approach perceives meanings as a 'process' (Arbnor & Bjerke, 1997). During an IA, some details and minor incidences may fade away and some life-changing events are remembered. However, and more importantly, it is the interactions and connections between these narrative stories that affect individual understanding of meanings (De Cieri, 2005).

4.4 Research Method

Research method is concerned with how researchers collect data in the research process (Saunders et al., 2009). Prior to deciding on the method, considerations must be given to available each method and technique. Specific advantages and disadvantages and the

choice of approach was considered in light of the research question and objectives, the extent of existing knowledge, available resources and philosophical underpinnings (Yin, 1994). Guided by the phenomenological philosophy and a qualitative, inductive approach, this study uses semi-structured interviews as the preferred research method.

4.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which to investigate complex questions, and understand human behaviours around a common dialogue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the case of this study, the common dialogue was enhanced by the researcher's own emersion in the Chinese language and culture. As a qualitative method, interviews had several advantages for this study. First, semi-structured interviews enabled expansion and extension of established theories by combining existing theoretical knowledge with new empirical insights (Yin, 1994). This is particularly important in studying topics that have not attracted much previous research attention, as is the case with Chinese IAs, because research does not have to rely on previous literature or prior empirical evidence (Eisenhardt, 1989). Second, unlike some quantitative methods in which responses are often restricted by a set of prescribed answers, interviews offer an iterative approach to probe underlying explanations and provide interviewees opportunities to conceptualise and explain matters of interest through a process of articulation that they may not previously have conducted (Yin, 1994).

Structured interviews allow researchers to ask questions in a standardised, efficient manner but lack flexibility. Thus, unstructured interviews proved a better choice as they provide greater breadth of data but lack focus. Semi-structured interviews take advantages from both structured and unstructured interviews and aim to maintain a balance between focus and flexibility, and is therefore considered as an appropriate protocol. In order to capture the perceptions of Chinese participants, a list of question themes were generated from the literature with a focus on the research questions, while open-ended questions allow new themes to emerge and develop from interviewees' responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By using semi-structured interviews, this study endeavoured to contribute deeper qualitative data to the current knowledge base and, more importantly to expand theories by combining existing theoretical knowledge with new empirical insights (Yin, 1994).

Chosen methods of engaging with participants were influenced by a number of considerations. Face-to-face interviews are preferable in many social studies as they provide the opportunity for interviewers to interact with interviewees and obtain useful non-verbal information such as body language and facial expression. Telephone-based interviews, which have gained popularity in recent years because it is a low cost and time-saving strategy, were also considered. In particular, it was noted that some scholars argue that telephone interviews are useful in discussing sensitive topics and gaining more direct and honest answers (Babbie, 2007).

This study involved interviews with international assignees who are located in different countries. With limited financial resources, travelling to all assigned locations was impossible. In addition, the nature of the IA made it difficult to arrange a definite interview time in advance. For example, some international assignees in the UK frequently travel to other European subsidiaries to complete temporary tasks. With considerations of both limited time and funding, the decision was made to combine both face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews.

4.4.2 Researcher Value

The relationships between the researcher and the research have been acknowledged in the literature. Traditionally, social researchers have tended to emphasise the importance of objectivity in social studies (Dey, 1993; Morgan, 1983; Patton, 2005). From an objectivist stance, validity and reliability are achieved by the researchers operating independently of their personal preferences. Without denying the advantages associated with such objectivity, in accordance with other social researchers today, I recognise the benefits to be gained by immersing myself in the points of view of the participants. I also recognise the fact that researchers bring their own implicit and explicit values to a study is gaining increasing recognition (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and the benefits to be gained from a researcher's own, 'insider' knowledge. Indeed, Lofland and colleagues (2006) stress the importance of 'selective competence' or 'insider knowledge, skill, or understanding' which enables researchers to be part of the process of appreciating and understanding the phenomenon.

Osland (1995; 2005) comments that her own experience of IAs was an important source of insight throughout her study. My own experience living and working in a different culture also helped me in this study in terms of generating the research topic, framing the interview questions and setting research objectives. Importantly, the fact that I am a native speaker of Mandarin helped to ensure that participants identified with researcher and also enabled the opportunity for participants to speak freely in their native tongue.

4.4.3 Theoretical Approach as in the Field

A variety of theoretical frameworks have been used to explore IA experiences and a wide range of factors have been experimented within empirical studies in order to understand the impact of an IA on individual well-being (De Cieri, 2005). During the literature review in this study, at least five different theoretical approaches in explaining IA experience can be distinguished. These approaches are based on:

- Motivational theories which concern reasons and factors for an international assignee accepting an IA;
- Adjustment processes focusing on individual experience in a new social and working environment, and factors related to adjustment effectiveness;
- Value perspectives concerning individual or organisational learning, and knowledge transfer from IAs;
- An organisational perspective, focusing on international human resource management practices or benefits, challenges and issues associated with managing international assignees;

- Careers, focusing on individual career development, objectives and success from an IA.

There are also some additional individual approaches that use part or integrate more than one of these approaches. For example, some investigate differences in motivations or IA objectives by comparing organisational and individual perspectives (e.g., Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Dickmann et al., 2008; Doherty et al., 2011; Minbaeva, 2008). Others investigate the relationships between IA adjustments and organisational human resource management practices, and how they affect individual career development (e.g., Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Black et al., 1991; Bolino, 2007; Dickmann & Doherty, 2007). Generally, these different theoretical approaches do not necessarily replace each other, but they explain different aspects of the same phenomenon. For each of the theories discussed, a number of key themes can be extracted and these support the pertinent research questions.

Drawn from existing theoretical approaches and literature analysis, a conceptual framework is formulated in this study as an analytical foundation for this thesis in addressing the central research question of the study. The framework is an integration of motivational, experience and career theories. The integration is not, however, a simple adaptation of these three theoretical components. The present study adopts a holistic, rather than a segmented, perspective on the issue of IA. It aims to include and examine relevant issues which potentially have an impact on Chinese international assignees. Therefore, in addressing the central research questions for this study, an analytical

framework with the capability to provide comprehensive understanding of all potential issues for IA, is required.

4.4.4 Research Question and Research Objectives

Associated with the research question: how is an IA perceived by Chinese international assignees? are a number of research objectives which are presented below:

Motivations

- To understand how the IA opportunity is perceived by international assignees;
- To understand the key motivations for accepting an IA; and
- To explore how career capital (three ways of knowing) influences the motivations.

Experience

- To determine the most salient themes in participants' experiences of an IA;
- To identify how participants perceive the positive and negative aspects of an IA;
and
- To understand how participants interpret various dimensions of career capital during an IA.

Career Capital

- To further the knowledge of career capital in an international context; and
- To investigate how the context of career capital development can be understood taking an overall view.

The focus of this study is to understand and interpret Chinese international assignees' perceptions of IA experiences. To this end, five research objectives deal with 'how' issues, an approach highlighted by researchers as the preferred strategy when a multiple number of how questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a complex contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Remenyi, Williams, Money, & Swartz, 1998; Robson, 1993; Yin, 1994).

4.5 Research Process

This section details the process followed to bring participants and the research questions together. There are a number of steps involved in the development of question themes, the identification of practical issues through piloting, setting the strategy to gain access to the research population, selecting the appropriate sampling technique and the final conduction of the interview. These steps are discussed in chronological fashion as shown in the summary diagram (Figure 4.1).

4.5.1 The Development of Question Themes

According to Flick (1998), research questions are like 'a door to the research field under

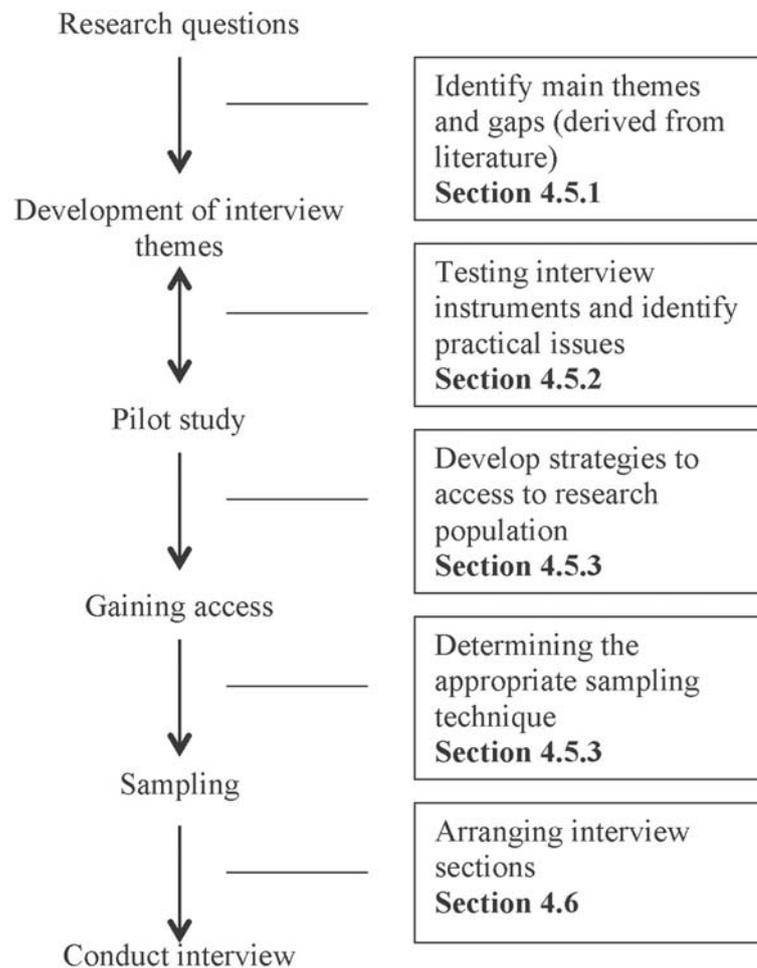


Figure 4.1. The Research Process

study' (p. 53). The initial interview themes were developed in five different areas: demographic, introductory information, motivation, experience and career development, to gather as much information as possible regarding the three expected objectives of the research. The interview questions were developed from the literature review, incorporating the Life History Template developed by Schein (1990b). Numerous open-

ended questions were added to allow new themes to emerge from the interviewees' responses (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

4.5.2 The Pilot Study

Given a lack of research into the experiences and career implications of Chinese IAs, and in order to ensure that the techniques used were robust (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001), a small pilot study was undertaken. The pilot study was carried out using both face-to-face and telephone interviews. The former involved two informal conversations, one with a Chinese international assignee in New Zealand, and one with a human resource manager from the same MNC. The purpose was to gain feedback on how the interviews might be conducted. The latter, telephone interviews were more formal, comprising three in-depth interviews with Chinese international assignees who were located in the Australia, UK and USA. The focus of these interviews was on practical issues, such as clarity of questions and the approximate time taken per interview, as well as appropriate content.

Although the pilot study was time consuming to set up and conduct, involving multiple visits to the human resource manager and a total of four hours formal telephone interviews with assignees, it provided several benefits to the research. First, the original intention was to use English as the language for interviews, and English is usually a prerequisite for the international assignees. However, the pilot study participants often reverted to Mandarin to explain themselves, suggesting that Mandarin was the more appropriate medium to explain their perceptions and feelings in depth.

Attention to the appropriate use of language was a strong feature of this study minimising cultural barriers and translation inconsistency. For example, the word ‘career’ can be translated into different Chinese characters such as *Zhi Ye* (responsibility and duties in specific industries), *Shi Ye* (individual fulfillment; personal achievement), or *Zhi Chang Sheng Ya* (the accumulation of one’s life experience in the job context). The choice of characters depends on the purpose of use and affects how participants interpret the meaning of research questions. In this example, the last Chinese word was selected and used because it reflected the two important elements of this research: contexts and experiences.

Second, the pilot study provided an opportunity to exercise the ‘craft’ (Kvale, 2007) of interviewing and identified practical issues in terms of design. Some interview questions were adjusted based on feedback. For example, Chinese people do not like to directly express their desires for money in a formal situation such as interviews as this is not acceptable in the Chinese culture, resulting in a change from ‘do you think financial benefit is an important factor for accepting an IA?’ to ‘will the significant increase in salary make a difference to you and your family?’ Similar adjustments were made to the notes for probing.

4.5.3 The Sample

A total of 31 Chinese international assignees from seven Chinese MNCs were used as the sample in this study. Thirteen international assignees were interviewed face-to-face

in either China or New Zealand and the rest of interviews were conducted by telephone at times to suit the interviewees.

Scope

As this was a qualitative study constrained by time and resources, it was important to ensure that participants make the most valuable contribution to answering the research questions. A choice, therefore, had to be made ‘about when and where to interview, who to talk to, or what information sources to focus on’ (Maxwell, 1996, p. 69). Initially, the sample was planned to be set in New Zealand only. However, due to the limited numbers of Chinese MNCs in New Zealand, the scope was extended. Other Western countries, including Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, South Africa, the USA, UK and several other European countries, were then added in order to increase the number of participants.

Gaining Access

Gaining access to participants proved a challenging task, as I faced similar difficulties of building trust and gaining personal information from Chinese people that have been documented in other studies (e.g., Fang, 2011; Shen & Edwards, 2006; Zheng & Lamond, 2009). The initial plan was to use a top down approach in which research invitations would be sent to human resource managers from around 30 Chinese MNCs to bring the study to the attention of the company and help identifying potential participants. Two organisations rejected invitations and there was no response from the

others. Informal approaches utilising supervisors' networks ended with polite responses but did not materialise into anything substantive. Similar situations have occurred with other research, with low response rates (Peng, Lu, Shenkar, & Wang, 2001) and obstructive gatekeepers (Cooke, 2009). The importance of strong connections and *guanxi*, as highlighted by other researchers (e.g., Shen, 2006; Zheng & Lamond, 2009) was more than evident.

It was at this later point that, following discussions with other researchers, a point-to-point strategy was adopted, utilising personal networks to create initial contacts and then expanding the sample from there. Snowball sampling was thus used as an appropriate approach acknowledging the importance of *guanxi* in the Chinese context (Cooke, 2009). As one type of non-probability sampling technique, snowball sampling is frequently used in social studies in which a high level of representation is challenging and the emphasis is on conceptual development and initial empirical contribution to a specific field (Bryman, 2001). Snowballing is especially useful to reach members of a special population who are difficult to locate, such as international assignees. Also, the choice of snowball sampling was culturally driven, recognising the importance of gaining personal connections and building trust in order to conduct research with Chinese individuals who are often reluctant to share personal information with strangers.

Initial connections were generated through my Chinese school networks in which four of my former classmates were working on IAs in large MNCs. After initial interviews of

personal contacts, they were then asked to introduce others from the target population and to help place an advertisement including the research purpose and content (Appendix C). A total of 31 international assignees from seven Chinese MNCs (Table 4.1) were located using this sampling technique.

The sample size is in line with similar qualitative studies on international assignees (Altman & Baruch, 2012; Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Mohr & Klein, 2004) and satisfied Strauss' (1987) saturation criterion¹ for qualitative data accumulation in which no new themes emerge from the data. The sample characteristics, including participants' age, position, length of IA and host country destinations are summarised in Table 4.2. The average age of participants was 27 which is younger than samples of similar studies (e.g., Doherty et al., 2011; Jokinen, 2010; Pinto et al., 2012). Another characteristic that differs from other studies is the participants' marital status, with the majority unmarried. While these factors may limit the implications of findings, they reflect the organisational focus of Chinese MNCs (e.g., an intention to use younger, unmarried assignees) which has further implications in understanding Chinese organisations and emerging forms of IAs. These characteristics also serve as important contextual factors (Chapter Seven) influencing individual motivations, experiences and career development. Although a key limitation of snowball sampling can be a lack of

¹ By this term, Strauss (1987, p. 65) refers to the situation in which 'no additional data are being found whereby the researcher can develop properties of the category. As he[sic] sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated when one category is saturated, nothing remains but to go onto new groups for data on other categories, and attempt to saturate these categories also'.

Table 4.1.

Participant Information

<i>Person</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Family Status</i>	<i>Length of Current Assignment¹</i>	<i>Previous IA Experience</i>	<i>Company Industry</i>	<i>Job Function</i>	<i>Host Country Destination</i>
1	25	M	Single	24 months	N	Banking	Management	USA
2	25	M	Single	36 months	N	Telco	Project Management	South Africa
3	26	M	Relationship	19 months	N	Telco	IT	UK
4	26	M	Relationship	24 months	Y	Telco	Marketing	NZ
5	26	M	Relationship	06 months	Y	IT	Marketing	UK
6	26	M	Relationship	20 months	N	Telco	IT	UK
7	26	M	Relationship	12 months	Y	Banking	Software Support	Netherlands
8	27	M	Relationship	07 months	N	Banking	IT	Hong Kong
9	27	M	Single	12 months	Y	Banking	IT	Sweden
10	27	M	Relationship	06 months	Y	IT	Project Management	France
11	27	M	Single	18 months	Y	Construction	Project Management	South Africa
12	27	F	Relationship	13 months	Y	IT	Software Support	USA
13	27	M	Single	11 months	N	IT	IT	NZ
14	27	F	Single	28 months	N	Construction	Management	Australia
15	27	M	Single	06 months	N	IT	IT	France
16	27	F	Single	06 months	N	IT	Management	UK
17	27	F	Single	12 months	Y	Telco	IT	Austria
18	27	F	Single	08 months	Y	Telco	Software Support	USA
19	27	F	Relationship	06 months	Y	Telco	IT	USA
20	27	M	Married/No children	12 months	N	Telco	Software Development	Germany
21	28	M	Single	12 months	N	Construction	Project Management	Australia
22	28	M	Relationship	08 months	Y	Construction	Project Management	Australia
23	28	F	Single	06 months	N	Telco	Management	NZ
24	28	M	Single	07 months	N	Telco	Engineering	NZ
25	28	M	Married/No children	11 months	N	Banking	Software Support	NZ
26	29	M	Single	06 months	Y	Telco	Engineering	UK
27	30	M	Single	12 months	N	Telco	Engineering	NZ
28	30	M	Relationship	18 months	N	IT	Management	UK
29	30	M	Single	06 months	Y	Banking	Software Support	Canada
30	32	M	Married/No children	06 months	Y	Telco	Engineering	NZ
31	32	M	Married/No children	10 months	Y	Telco	Marketing	UK

¹ This refers to how long the participant has been on an IA (at the moment of interview, e.g., 2010 or 2011).

Table 4.2.

Summary of the Sample's Characteristics

<i>Sample demographics</i>	<i>Participants N</i>	<i>%</i>
Number of interviewees	31	100
Age		
Average; SD	27.54;1.72	
[Min., Max.]	[25,32]	
Gender		
Male	24	77.4
Female	7	22.6
Marital Status		
Married without children	4	12.9
In a relationship	11	35.5
Single	16	51.6
IA destination		
Australia	3	9.6
Europe*	6	19.4
UK	7	22.6
US	4	12.9
New Zealand	7	22.6
Others**	4	12.9
Length of current IA (months)		
Average; SD	12.52; 7.55	
[Min., Max.]	[2,36]	
Previous IA experience		
Yes	15	48.4
No	16	51.6
Company classification		
Bank	6	19.4
Construction	4	12.9
IT	7	22.6
Telco	14	45.1
Job position		
Engineering	4	12.9
IT	8	25.8
Management	5	16.1
Marketing	3	9.6
Project management	5	16.1
Software development/ support	6	19.5

Note: * Europe includes, Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden.

** Other countries include, Canada, Hong Kong and South Africa.

representativeness, the sample obtained covered a wide range of demographic, geographic and temporal variables.

4.6 Data Collection

4.6.1 Interviewer's Role

The essence of the semi-structured interview is the 'establishment of a human-to-human relation with the participant and the desire to understand rather than to explain' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 645). As an interviewer, my role was to 'learn' (Wax, 1960) participants' life stories and to 'understand' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) their viewpoints. Therefore, it was important to gain trust from the interviewees. A common language was seen as an important relationship building tool, so Mandarin was used to avoid any misunderstanding in the translation and develop a homo-cultural atmosphere. The referral technique of snowballing also helped establish trust and support. An informal, conversational style was adopted to lessen the distance between interviewer and interviewees. Although close rapport with participants may create problems such as losing objectivity, its value in opening doors to more informed research overrides this (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In fact, interviewers are increasingly recognised as active participants in interactions with interviewees, and interviews are seen as negotiated accomplishments of both interviewers and participants that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The social interaction between interviewers and participants is also reflected in what Douglas (1985) refers to as ‘creative interviewing’ where the interview becomes a forum of ‘mutual disclosure’. It was therefore important that each interview began with some brief introduction of the researcher as an international (self-initiated) assignee. This not only provided an opportunity to explain the motives and aims of the study, but also showed my willingness to be part of the ‘interaction’. Connections (guanxi) between the participants and the researcher were identified including travel experiences of their hometowns, and familiarity with their companies or IA locations and other circumstances. These might be seen as of minor relevance to the research but it an important part of the essential process of establishing a trusting environment and driving the conversations.

4.6.2 Interview Procedure

The interviews were performed between June 2010 and December 2011, ranging in length from 40-65 minutes with an average of 45 minutes. A total of 37 interviews were conducted with six participants interviewed twice as further clarifications were needed after the initial interviews. The language of all interviews was Mandarin.

Prior to each interview, an Information Sheet and a Consent Form were sent to participants (Appendix D and Appendix E). This allowed them to be familiar with the interview objectives, structure and context, and to ensure they understood their rights in the study. As a semi-structured interview, the procedure was guided by themes that emerged from the literature, but which also allowed participants to generate possible

interview directions and new themes which could also be explored through probing. This flexibility was important given the aim of gaining rich social meanings, while the structured components maintained a degree of focus and consistency (Patton, 2005).

Participants responded to semi-structured interviews based on the protocol in Appendix F. All interviews were tape recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken during interviews and later used to verify audiotape transcription. As the interviews involved a recall of the past or present experience, questions were arranged in a natural flow of time so that the interviewees would find it easy to think back from the beginning of their work. The interview was started with general questions about the participants such as their IA duration, age and marital status. These were used to determine what information was relevant for subsequent questions. The interview then moved onto questions about the Chinese international assignees' companies and their positions. This allowed me to determine the context of their IA experiences and how that affected individuals' IA decisions. This also served to 'refresh' participants' memories of their IA experiences and prepare for upcoming questions.

Next, questions were asked about each of the prepared themes: motivation, IA experience, career capital, and the human resource management policies of the organisation. The discussion encompassed all the topics in the interview schedule, but still allowed for questions to flow from what participants said (Kvale, 2007). Following the interview, attention was given to any possible (important) themes that might be valuable for subsequent interviews. Interview questions (the schedule) were then

updated based on each interview to ensure the questions focused on the emergent empirical directions instead of predetermined questionnaires.

4.6.3 Ethical Considerations

Although ethical issues are always a serious matter, the cross-cultural nature of this study promotes further consideration so the participants' cultural background is respected and sensitive information is protected. Full ethical approval from Massey University Human Ethics Committee was obtained (Appendix G). This research project was carried out based on four guidelines outlined in Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct (Massey University, 2010):

- *Informed consent* from subjects who must voluntarily agree to participate based on full and open information;
- A basic moral principle that *deception and misrepresentation* are not means to extract information from participants;
- *Privacy and confidentiality* needs to be respected; and
- There needs to be an assurance that data are *accurate* without fabrication, fraudulent materials and omissions.

Participants were informed of the purpose and process of this research beforehand, and participants' rights, which are outlined on the consent agreement form, had been explained clearly prior to interviews. The identity of the participants in the study was

and will be held in confidence. All tapes, field notes, and transcripts are stored under fictitious names to ensure the anonymity of the participants and their employers.

4.7 Data Analysis

4.7.1 Transcription

All interviews were transcribed before initiating formal analysis. Computer software Express Scribe was used to assist this process. Although it was tempting to save time and transcribe selectively from the content, it was considered important to treat every detail from the conversation as a possible important element. Word-to-word transcription allowed me to develop full immersion in the context and reflect more thoroughly on the nuances of the data.

Initially, the plan was to translate transcripts from Mandarin into English so the data were standardised and understandable to supervisors. However, this also raised concerns that linguistic features of the data would be lost in the process. Language is culturally specific, and tone, grammar and specific words are all meaningful elements of individual expression (Yin, 1994). It was therefore decided to maintain the transcripts in their original form, without the risk of losing meaning through translation and so the analysis used the Mandarin transcripts. They have only been translated into English to provide quotes. A professional translator has verified this translation validity to ensure meanings were not changed through the process.

4.7.2 Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Systems

The use of computer analysis in qualitative data analysis has become more popular in recent years. As information technology develops at a rapid rate, computer assisted qualitative data analysis systems (CAQDAS) have become more sophisticated, from basic content analysis in the 1960s to today's more critical functions such as assisting in theory building, modelling, linking codes and attaching analytic memoranda to specific points in the text (Saunders et al., 2009).

CAQDAS provide several benefits to qualitative researchers. They offer a systematic tool to organise hundreds of pages of text. CAQDAS also offer flexibility for searching, accessing and reviewing contexts from the data. Despite these benefits, it is also important to be aware of the potential disadvantages and limitations. One criticism concerns the role of researchers. The danger here is that these tools can distance researchers from their fieldwork and their data. Indeed, some believe that these methods presume 'an objectivist, realist, foundational epistemology' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 638), and that their use too often takes for granted the interpretive procedures and assumptions that transform field notes into text-based materials. Another criticism is that coding may become a standardised procedure rather than allowing for a more emergent process of analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The risk may be the physical separation of coded material from the original text. An emphasis on codes and categories can 'produce endless variable analyses that fail to take account of important situational and contextual factors' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 638).

An important message here is to be circumspect about the role that computers can play in the process of analysis and data integration. It is important that the researcher avoids letting the computer (and the software) determine the form and content of interpretive activity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). They cannot perform the creative and intellectual tasks of devising categories and deciding which categories are relevant or of generating appropriate propositions with which to interrogate the data (Richards, 2009). Hence, ‘informal’ analyses of transcripts (and accompanying field notes and references) was an important part of the process. This research experience suggests that although the computer software was a useful tool for this study, it was by no means a substitute for close reading and immersion in the data and both methods were complementary in developing understanding.

The selection of appropriate software should be highly driven by the research objectives and methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In selecting the appropriate programme, several factors were considered. First, this study involved a significant amount of textual data from 37 interviews. This meant it would require a system that can manage several hundred pages of text. Another important factor was that the selected programme needed to be capable of handling Mandarin so that original transcripts can be coded and searched directly. Furthermore, the research was exploratory so features such as fast search and retrieval were necessary. This study used ‘template analysis’ (King, 1998) which means that a set of themes was developed from the literature review prior to the data analysis. This required a system which can store relevant articles and link them with the empirical data. It also required the system to have high levels of flexibility in

terms of changing, moving and merging codes. With these factors in mind, QSR NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising) or NVivo 9.1 was chosen for this study.

NVivo is a powerful program that allows easy access to data and extensive automation of clerical tasks. The software allows users to classify, sort and arrange information, examine relationships in the data, and combine analysis with linking, shaping, searching and modelling (Patton, 2005). The ninth version has added several new features which were very useful for this project. PDF files can be now stored and coded, meaning that the literature can be imported into NVivo and analysed along with the empirical data. The software now recognises various languages including Mandarin, which means phrase searching can be done directly in Mandarin from the transcripts.

4.7.3 Coding

Coding is the process of making judgements about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and is an essential part of content analysis. Unlike quantitative coding which is about data reduction by a system of symbols or numbers, qualitative coding focuses more on 'data retention' (Richards, 2009, p. 56). Coding is not merely the labelling of parts of documents about a topic but rather bringing them together to develop the identifiable and understanding relevant topics. The goal is to learn from the data, to keep revisiting the data extracts until patterns and explanations are seen and understood. Coding does not eliminate data but provides a systematic tool

to revisit it (Daniels & Cannice, 2004). Coding leads researchers from the data to ideas and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea.

Coding should be purposeful and the purposes strongly influence the standards of coding and analytical results (Richards, 2009). The first purpose was to gain information about participants (such as gender, age, marital status, and their IAs such as location, length of IAs, job position) so these attributes could be used to compare, link and explain patterns. The initial process 'entails little interpretation. Rather, researchers are attributing a class of phenomena to a segment of text' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). This type of coding is referred to as descriptive coding (Richards, 2009). NVivo was very effective in facilitating this type of coding. Statistical information developed onto a spreadsheet was easily imported into NVivo. This information then was used to generate queries based on the sample's attributes.

The second purpose was to develop a category of topics that emerged from the data. This was achieved by a type of coding referred to as topic coding (Richards, 2009) which is intended to provide accurate descriptions of the varieties of retrieved material and to develop understanding based on frequent patterns. NVivo can search for a particular word or phrase throughout the document and will code this into a particular node. The last purpose of coding was to see patterns from the data and to make, illustrate and develop categories theoretically. This was the process where ideas are 'taking off from the data' (Richards, 2009, p. 141), to progress into themes. It is often referred to as analytic coding as it is derived from interpretation and reflection on

meaning (Babbie, 2007). This was the core part of this study in which meanings were considered in context, categories were developed to express new ideas and connections were merged to form concepts. NVivo stored these ‘reflections’ in memos and annotations where they could be revisited. NVivo also allows for the data to be sorted based on their topics and categories so patterns and connections can be obtained.

4.7.4 Reflexivity

Transcription texts are social facts which are ‘produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 640). In a phenomenological paradigm, interview materials are treated as narrative accounts rather than true pictures of reality. They are participants’ reflections on their social interactions at a certain time and in a certain context. The purpose of data analysis in qualitative research is to interpret and understand these reflections. Hence, the NVivo technique is but one tool to integrate and understand narrative data. For example, I maintained a journal with reflections of my perceptions and possible biases in interpreting the meaning of responses and my interaction with individual participants from various backgrounds during data collection. This seemed to meet the term of ‘scriptive reading’ (Monin, Barry, & Monin, 2003):

Scriptive reading is a form of rhetorical analysis that acknowledges the role of dominant (standard) reading in textual interpretation; moves on to a critical reading that explores aspects of performance, perspective and persuasion in the text; and, in a final reflexive reading, considers the

potential impacts of a particular reading experience on reading outcomes. (p. 168)

This method emphasises the importance of reflexive reading that is a careful, critical and reflective interpretation of the transcripts (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). To achieve the goal of reflexivity, a three step reading process was followed. First, all transcripts were read thoroughly to gain overall understanding on themes and trends. The goal was to generate possible passages for specific areas of interest for further analysis. Second, each transcript was read line-by-line, paragraph-by-paragraph. This was the most detailed and extensive phase where previously unrecognised meaning in the text was analysed. This process aimed to merge and categorise similar themes or topics among transcripts. The final step involved reflexive reading. It was essentially a process of questioning interpretations which brought a level of transparency to the reading and interpretative, and provided an opportunity to revisit the data and the interpretation made. Hence, a more reflective and labour-intensive mechanism of engaging the research material was utilised alongside the coding and thematic technique provided by NVivo.

4.7.5 Nodes from the Data

The coding process began with the first transcript by using the nodes template from the literature as a guide whilst ensuring the flexibility to let new nodes emerge from the data. The process involved continual comparisons between the data and the literature, and continuous modifications of the nodes in the light of reflexive reading focusing on

the research questions. Although the data-driven approach allowed new nodes to emerge from the transcripts, it also created a problem that the number of nodes became unwieldy. This ‘coding trap’ is also acknowledged by other researchers (Richards, 2009; Weitzman & Miles, 1995). In order to find a balance between comprehensiveness and conciseness, all nodes were related back to the research questions and objectives. A general folder was used to store those nodes that were ‘interesting’ but not (yet) related to research questions. NVivo provided the flexibility to go back and forth between transcripts, and split, merge, move, and change nodes easily.

After that, the process progressed onto the next transcript, using the existing codes from the first transcript to guide the process and allowing new nodes to emerge. The first transcript was then revisited to see if there was any representation of the new nodes. Although this process involved a large time commitment, it provided a rich source of information and encouraged further immersion into the data. This process also ensured all transcripts were integrated and facilitated the comparisons between participants for similarities and differences.

Another reflection from coding the data was the usefulness of the ‘memo’ and ‘annotation’ functions of NVivo. Memo stores overall project progress so the research history can be revisited to see the development at a particular time. They are the places where ‘the project grows, as ideas become more complex and, later, more confident’ (Richards, 2009, p. 80). Annotations store ideas and comments about individual documents. In NVivo, annotations which can be edited and linked with the

specific transcript content means ideas and comments can be tracked from individual documents. For example, in one transcript, when the participant was asked if financial benefit is an important factor for her IA decision, she answered no. However, later in the conversation, she began to talk about how expensive apartments are in Beijing, and she tried her best to save money so she could buy one after the IA. This contradiction was noted in an annotation. When analysing other transcripts, similar situations emerged where people were less direct in acknowledging the importance of financial benefits. The original annotation was then revisited to include more comments about the frequency of contradiction and possible reasons. Annotations were also useful in analytical coding in which critical questions were asked about important parts of the text. Hence, NVivo, is in this way, largely a support for the traditional technique of textual interpretation, rather than a substitution devoted primarily to categorical classification.

4.8 Validity

Maxwell (1996) highlights the issues of validity by referring to 'the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account' (p. 87). Validity is not limited to a study's findings, it concerns every step in the research process and whether this process has resulted in a true representation of what is being studied.

The criteria for evaluating validity were arguably developed for positivistic research designs and some researchers argue that criteria such as internal and external validity

are inappropriate for interpretive research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather, in interpretive research, validity is concerned with 'whether the researcher has gained full access to the knowledge and meanings of respondents' (Remenyi et al., 1998, p. 115). Exploring the validity of this study meant asking whether it communicates participants' experiences of IA and the meanings they give to these experiences. This could, consequently, only be achieved by paying constant attention to the 'quality of craftsmanship during investigation' (Kvale, 2007, p. 235). To assess the quality of this project's research designs and implementations, several approaches were considered based on the suggestion by Yin (1994) and Maxwell (1996). The first potential approach was 'member check' which meant validating my interpretation of the interview data with participants. Although this approach might be useful in theory, it was not a practical technique because the 'favour' was used in getting the interviews and asking for further comments on it would be considered as imposition and rude. However, some validation of the participants' first interview was done in an ad hoc manner when the second interview took place with the same participant. During the second interview, questions were asked referring to comments and opinions mentioned by international assignees in their first interviews.

The 'constant comparative method' (Lofland et al., 2006) was also used to compare how different themes had been discussed by different participants. This not only allowed the common and important themes to emerge but also was useful to validate that occurrences of these themes were not contingent.

4.9 Reliability

Reliability is concerned with consistency in circumstances of research replication (Richards, 2009), which means results should be the same if the research is conducted under the same conditions such as using the same method, or the same person using the same method at another time. However, qualitative studies are contextually specific. There are concerns that the concept of replication in qualitative research is debatable given the likely complexity of phenomena being studied and the inevitable impact of context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996). Similarly, those who believe that qualitative research is dynamic and can only be conducted effectively in a responsive manner argue that studies can never be, or even should be, repeated (Kvale, 2007).

Because of such concerns, the idea of reliability in this study focused on 'confirmability' of findings (Richards, 2009). In other words, it was about ensuring that the researcher has been true to the data generated. Inter-coder agreement (Silverman, 1985) is one of the most common methods that researchers use to test for confirmability. However, the language nature of the data eliminated many academics and the academic nature eliminated the use of personal friends.

At this point, research objectives were revisited to see if there were any other ways to verify the consistency of the research findings independently. As discussed earlier, NVivo provided an integrated platform to ensure consistency when analysing and coding the data, as well as relating it to pre-existing literature. Also, the reflexive

reading of the transcripts and written notes provided a means to integrate the NVivo results and vice versa.

4.10 Summary

This chapter has discussed various methodological issues involved in the study. First, it justified the selection of the semi-structured interview method for this empirical study outlining philosophical and contextual appropriateness in investigating the research questions. Then the data collection technique and procedure used were discussed, including the research design, the defining of sample and conducting fieldwork. Critical issues such as gaining access to participants and the use of Mandarin as the language medium were justified. Afterwards, the methods and techniques utilised in the data analysis of the study were discussed explaining the relevance of NVivo and the importance of reflexive reading. Finally, the rigor of the study and ethical concerns of working with human subjects were analysed. The next chapter presents findings based on the template analysis of the participants' narratives about their reasons for accepting an IA.

Chapter Five

Motivation to Accept an IA

A good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.

-- Lao Tzu

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the decision by Chinese international assignees to accept an IA, and marks the first of three chapters that present findings and analysis. It addresses the following research objectives:

- To understand how the IA opportunity is perceived by international assignees;
- To understand the key motivations for accepting an IA; and
- To explore how career capital (the three ways of knowing) influences individual motivations.

To discuss the multiple, complex and interdependent nature of these motives, this chapter is structured in the following way. First, each of the dominant motives is analysed respectively, utilising participants' comments to demonstrate their representations in the findings. Second, the discussion moves to subsidiary motives explaining their roles in decision-making. In the last part of the Chapter, career capital is explored, summarising the interdependency of motives.

5.2 Overview

Main themes from the findings are shown in a node tree (Figure 5.1). This tree is then expanded, throughout the chapter, reflecting the evolving sub-themes and their interrelationships. These node trees serve two functions. First, as the organising device for the chapter, they maintain a close connection between data analysis and the findings discussed here. Second, as the analytical device for research questions, the nodes emphasise links and interdependencies between the themes. Where appropriate, interrelationships of key themes are provided to draw the rationale from the participants' comments. 'List' of possible motivational factors are relatively well established in the literature but the understanding of interrelationships between them remain unclear (Pinto et al., 2012). Hence, the primary goal of this chapter is to focus on how, for Chinese nationals posted abroad, different factors affect each other to form the IA decision.

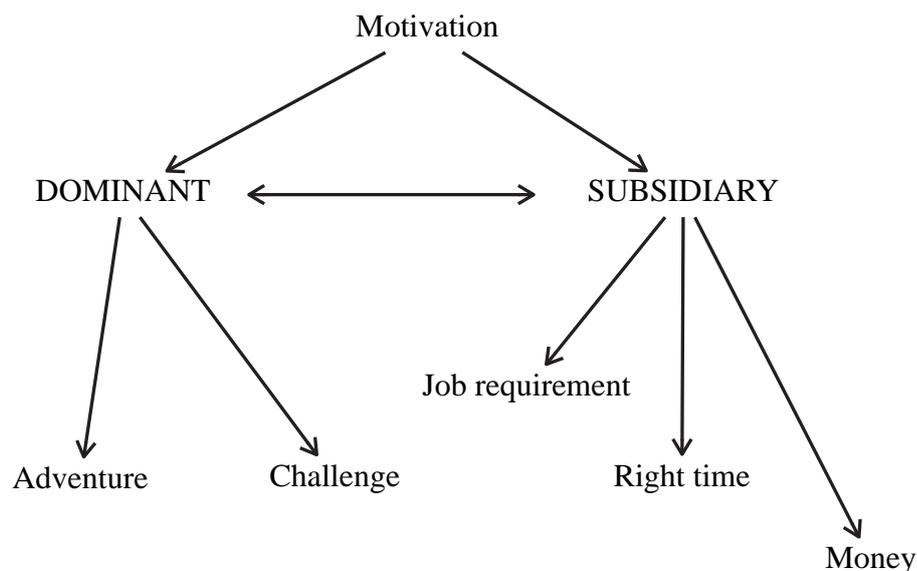


Figure 5.1. Motives for Accepting an IA

The chapter identifies a number of key themes that contribute to the IA literature and, specifically, to the understanding of IA motivations. Where appropriate, findings are compared with other studies to identify similarities and differences. Findings in this chapter report dominant and subsidiary motives according to frequencies of themes in the findings, as well as Chinese participants' own explanations of the significance of various factors. The dominant themes present participants' main reasons for accepting an IA. The subsidiary motives are those whose importance is emphasised only when dominant factors are fulfilled. Subsidiary motives can thereby be understood as 'adding value' when making an IA decision.

5.3 Adventure

Adventure emerged as a dominant motivation for accepting an international posting. Adventure was defined as any comment which expressed a desire for an opportunity to do something outside the normal range of experience (Campbell, 2008). All participants considered the IA as an adventure that they wanted to have. Most participants had little knowledge of their host destination so the excitement of the unknown appeared to be an important motivation. Frequently, phrases such as 'go out and have a look' and 'a great adventure' were used to account for the decision to accept an IA. These findings echo previous studies of IA management, where international travel, personal adventure and cross-cultural experiences were a major reason for accepting an overseas assignment (Doherty et al., 2011; Hippler, 2009; Pinto et al., 2012).

Figure 5.2 points to the themes, indicated in bold type that suggested accepting an IA for adventure. Two sub-themes of adventure were important. First, IAs were often considered as a rare, and therefore, valuable opportunity:

I could't refuse it. How often do you get the chance to work and live in another country and get paid to do it? (male, IT).

It was the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I think. If I refused it, I didn't know when I would have another chance. So I accepted it without too much consideration. (male, marketing)

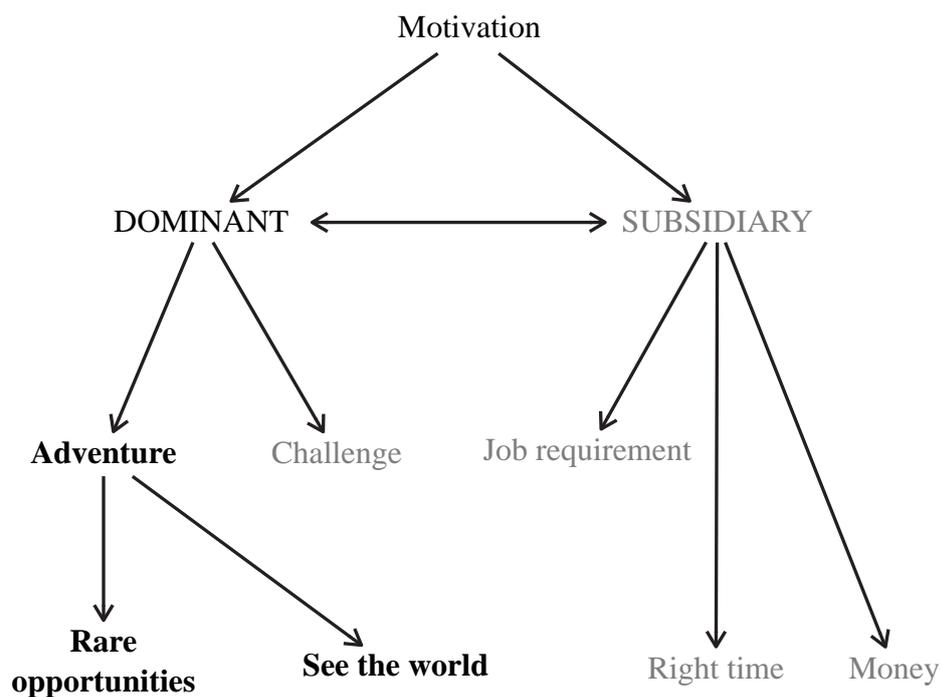


Figure 5.2. Adventure as a Dominant Factor

The comments show that the initial focus of participants was on the positive aspects of IA. The challenges and the risks were not foremost in the decision-making process of whether to accept an IA. Even though the majority of participants had no previous international experience, they were not afraid of the 'unknown'. There is a sense that these IAs can be usefully understood using the metaphor of a hero's adventure (Osland, 1995). In this regard, participants may not be clear about the relevance of the experience nor the actual return from IAs but their appreciation of the rarity of IAs drove them to accept.

The second sub-theme of adventure was exploration, or the opportunity to 'see the world':

I always wanted to do something different. The outside world has lots of unknown things but is very exciting to me. You know, the desire to go to experience a different world. (male, IT)

My initial motivation wasn't about the financial benefits, but mainly because I wanted to go out to have a look. To broaden my views. (male, marketing)

While travel needs are acknowledged in the company-backed IA literature (Dickmann et al., 2008; Doherty et al., 2011), this theme of adventure is considered as a major motivation predominately in studies of self-initiated expatriation (e.g., Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Thorn, 2009b). The findings here suggest that Chinese assignees may have similar strong orientations and the desire to travel and to experience a different culture.

This desire to travel and the curiosity to look at the world is an individual motivation. They are also intrinsic motivations, done for the inherent satisfaction of being involved in the activity itself (Haines, Saba, & Choquette, 2008). As the definition of adventure indicates, most of the participants were unclear as to 'what [they were] looking for' from the international experience when asked about their expectations from IAs. 'Have a look' and 'give it a go' were frequently used terms for their IA motivation. Participants were motivated by broad curiosity rather than specific goals, and the learning agenda is personally improvised (Inkson et al., 1997). However, as the initial excitement fades, and challenges become a reality, then the significance of adventure may become less important. These changes in motivation will be explored in Chapter Six.

5.4 Challenge

While adventure focuses mainly on the excitement and curiosity associated with unpredictable future experiences, the other dominant and related concept of challenge to emerge from the interviews emphasises the 'outcomes' from these events (Figure 5.3).

Hence, with challenge, there is a recognition that there will be difficulties, but an expectation that there will be some resulting 'transformation' (Osland, 1995). In this context, a professional challenge is seen as self-affirmation or proving something to yourself (Hippler, 2009). Such a challenge can, for example, involve mastering a difficult technical problem, establishing a new company unit or carrying out one's tasks under difficult circumstances. One participant summarised this clearly:

The attractive aspect of it [the IA] is that I can do something different. I can handle a task by myself, for example, which I didn't have the opportunity to do in China. (male, project management)

All participants identified the challenge as a driver and viewed the IA as an opportunity to change their lives, both on a professional and a personal level. It is important to note here that, while participants acknowledged the challenging nature of the IA, they also

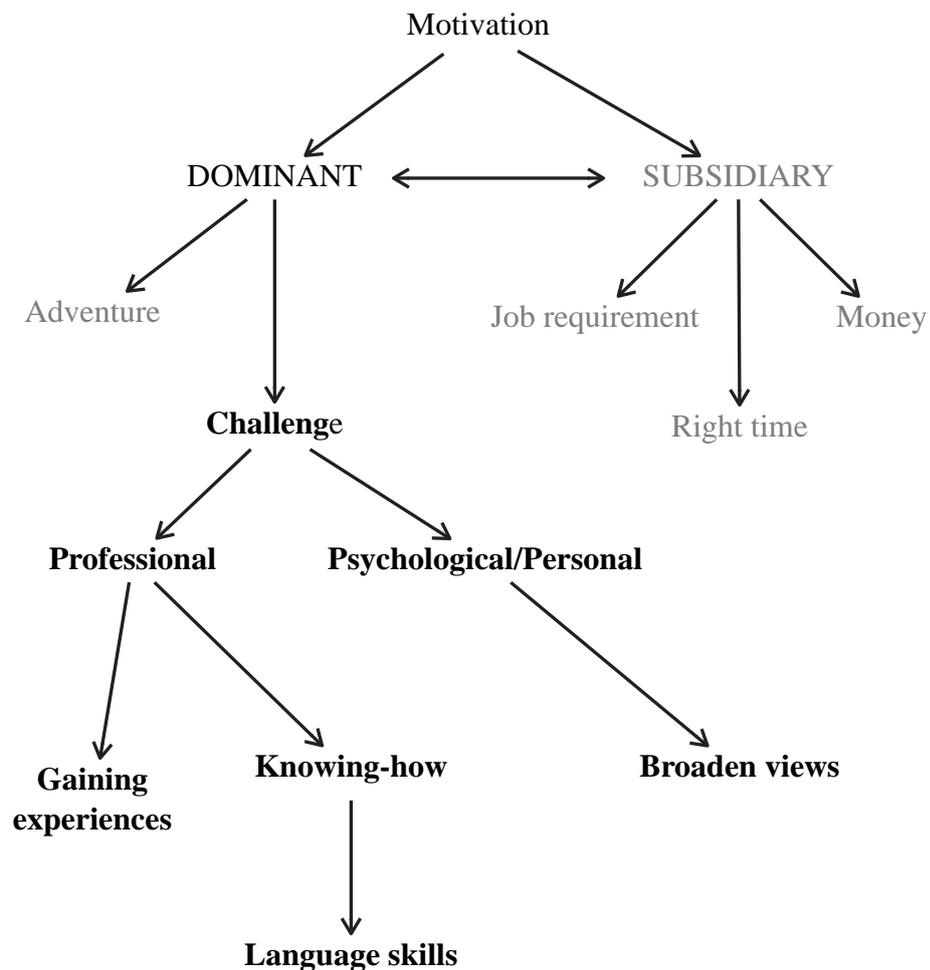


Figure 5.3. Challenge as a Dominant Factor

understood its limitations in terms of new skills development, particularly in the area of job-related, technical skills. From an individual perspective, the challenges of an IA were directly related to transferring and implementing existing skills to a new environment. Most participants did not have expectations around developing new knowing-how from IAs:

I didn't expect too much on the learning side of the posting. My job content was generally set up before my departure. I knew what I was going to do there. But I was keen to practice what I have learnt in China. (male, software development)

This finding is contrary to much of the current literature which suggests that job related skill development is among the top motives for accepting an IA (Dickmann et al., 2008; Doherty et al., 2011; Pinto et al., 2012; Vo, 2009). While it is not intended to suggest that no new knowing-how was developed during an IA (and, indeed, some development of knowing-how will be explored in the next chapter), it did confirm that skills development was not among the major reasons for accepting an IA. Further cross-sample comparisons found no impact of the duration of the posting on their professional motives. Participants who were on long-term IAs (e.g., more than 24 months) did not consider skills development as a major motive. This is again contrary to the literature which is largely dominated by studies of long-term assignees and suggests that assignees are motivated by long-term career benefits as a result of knowing-how development from IAs (Dickmann et al., 2008). In this study, Chinese long term assignees, on the other hand, had limited expectations of knowing-how gains despite the

opportunity of development in a new context. The difference observed here may be due to the organisational strategies and practices of Chinese MNCs which utilise IAs mainly for implementational purposes, rather than for management or career development (Shen, 2006). The international assignees understood this and therefore had limited expectations of the scale of skill development. Instead, guided by their organisational focus, they were motivated by the opportunities to ‘practice their skills’ in a new and challenging environment with a hope that this would bring broader benefits to their careers:

I didn’t expect to learn new skills. It wasn’t my focus, because the more you expect, the more disappointed you might get. But I appreciated the opportunity that I could practice my skills in a real front line position.
(male, management)

The realistic understanding of the organisational strategies narrowed the gap between organisational and individual motives, and hence Chinese assignees may experience less dissatisfaction about their career expectations while on a posting. Literature on Western international assignees suggests that many repatriation issues such as job dissatisfaction and job turnover are due to divergences in expectations between international assignees and their employers (Dickmann et al., 2008). The findings therefore reference the importance of ensuring organisational foci are clearly understood by their assignees and employees have realistic expectations of IAs and future career prospects.

Though there were limited expectations around the development of ‘hard’ or technical skills, participants indicated the significance of wider personal development, and the relevance of improving their language skills:

I really want to develop my English skills ... I think the IA would be a fantastic opportunity to learn English. You don't get the opportunity to practice your English in China. (male, IT)

I think my English isn't bad, at least among my colleagues and friends in China. But I still want to see how good it is in a broader context. So, I think improving my English is part of the reason for me accepting this posting. (female, IT)

Chapter Six will discuss how English competencies are part of career capital development. This means there is a consistency between assignees' expectations (motives) and the outcomes (career capital). Again, the finding stresses the importance of ensuring the close links between organisational and individual motives to improve IA effectiveness (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010).

Twenty-six participants also identified a desire for psychological or personal challenges from the IA, seeking to develop existential or deeper meanings for themselves.

I wanted to challenge myself. It is sometimes too comfortable in China so you lose direction and become lazy. I chose this opportunity so I can strengthen my mind. I think this is important to me, personally. (male, management)

This stated desire ‘to challenge myself’ is related to intrinsic motivation, as outlined by Haines, et al (2008) who argue that individuals who express high levels of self-determination have an inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges. An IA is generally considered an experience filled with novelty and challenge (Adler, 2001) and consequently, participants who reported high intrinsic motivation for an IA should also express high willingness to accept an IA. Participants who have psychological motives also tend to overcome IA difficulties as they understand these are parts of the challenge experience.

It [the initial difficulty] didn’t worry me too much because I was kind of expecting it to be out of my comfort zone ... I think I wouldn’t come here [NZ] if I was looking for easy tasks. (male, IT)

Challenges and difficulties during an IA, specifically at the initial stage of adjustment (also see Section 6.2) are often considered as causes for IA failure (Lee & Liu, 2006; Shaffer et al., 1999; Shay & Baack, 2004). However, findings here suggest that these difficulties may not be the actual reasons for such failures. Instead, the underlying reasons lie with the differences between individual expectations and reality. Again, it demonstrates that the IA is more likely to be successful if assignees are more realistic about the experience and challenges involved (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009).

5.5 Subsidiary Motives

The decision to accept an IA is seen as a process rather than simply a reaction to an offer being made (Richardson & Mallon, 2005). In this regard, assignees actively relate

one theme to another to make their decision. It is therefore important to understand any underlying factors for accepting an IA and the roles they play in decision-making. While there are a number of studies ranking the importance of different IA motives (e.g., Dickmann et al., 2008; Hippler, 2009; Pinto et al., 2012), their inter-dependencies (e.g., how do these motives influence each other?) are not sufficiently clear. This section focuses on these and explores individual motives in the subsidiary category and their interrelationships with those dominant factors as illustrated in Figure 5.4.

5.5.1 Job Requirement

Twenty participants pointed out that the organisational requirement of overseas positions played a role in decision-making. This could be significant:

It was part of the company's requirement to go to the IA. (male, management)

I didn't think about it too much. When the manager made the decision, I thought, well, if it's part of the job requirement, I would be happy to accept it. (female, IT)

This seems to meet the claim in a number of research studies that assignees are sometimes compelled to accept the assignment by the employing company (Hippler, 2009; Pinto et al., 2012; Suutari, 2003). Turning down the offer and resisting the company's plan to send them abroad may have implied some serious consequences that could have hindered their career prospects. In order to maintain good relationships with

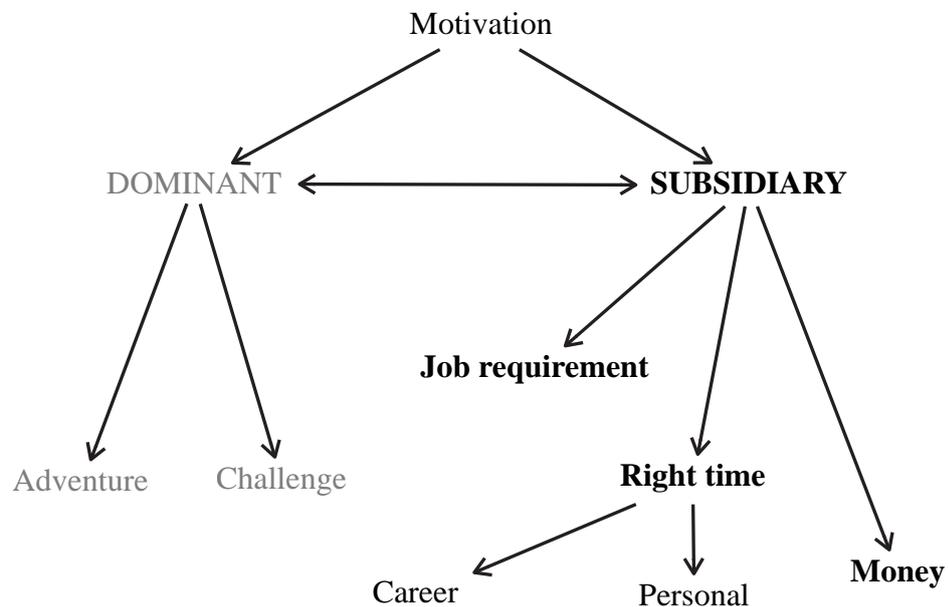


Figure 5.4. Subsidiary Factors for Accepting an IA

their managers and build a good organisation-citizen image, participants were careful about rejecting IA offers. Aware of the career risks involved, some interviewees decided they would rather take the safe option and accept the assignment:

It was decided by the upper manager, and I think he wouldn't be happy if I refused the opportunity. (male, IT)

If I had refused it or been fussy about the opportunity, they [the managers] would remember it for the next time. I don't think I will have another chance [for IA]. (female, IT)

I am new to the company, so I had to be careful about dealing with my managers. I don't want to give them the impression that I am a picky

person. It wouldn't be helpful for my career within the company. (male, project management)

These comments on potential negative impacts within their organisations were related to networks and the hierarchical nature of relationships with managers. It was clear that participants recognised the importance of maintaining good *guanxi* with others to progress within the organisation. Hence, the participants' intentions were to consider possible knowing-whom consequences when making an IA decision. It is widely acknowledged in the literature that respecting hierarchy is an important factor for developing career in the Chinese context (Law, Wong, Wang, & Wang, 2000; Wong, 2005). The findings here suggest that, notwithstanding the rapid internalisation of Chinese MNCs, certain organisational cultures such as the importance of hierarchy and *guanxi* are still strongly apparent.

At the same time, unlike some other studies which identify organisational pressure as a major motive (Pinto et al., 2012), the finding here shows that perceived organisational pressure is rather secondary to motives such as adventure and challenge. Participants claimed that organisational pressure was only a part of their consideration and the potential individual benefits were much more important:

I couldn't think of any negative reasons not to accept it ... it was also part of the job requirement. (male, management)

I always wanted to go out, and besides, I didn't want to reject my manager's decision so I was happy to accept it. It was beneficial for both [the company and myself]. (male, marketing)

Hence, the process of IA decision-making is a process of balancing the mix of different factors and evaluating potential gain and loss from the IA (Hippler, 2009). Some factors serve as ‘push’ factors, enhancing individual willingness to seek or accept an IA, while other factors serve as a ‘pull’ effect, resulting in more hesitation to consider the opportunity (Pinto et al., 2012). In this study, organisational pressure did not seem to fit into either of these two categories. It has a relatively ‘neutral’ status and plays a supplementary role in affecting other motivations. In other words, Chinese participants were not wholly motivated by the job requirement to accept or discouraged by it to refuse the opportunity. Only after participants had evaluated the major benefits such as challenges and adventure would they consider the job requirement to reach a final decision.

The finding here provides insights concerning the complexity of IA motives and the importance of recognising factors outside the organisational domain even where an element of compulsion is involved. It has particular relevance as too often, organisational factors are considered the dominant influences in IA decision-making, so organisations soften the impact by offering financial incentives and potential career prospects to push employees to go abroad (Dickmann et al., 2008; Doherty et al., 2011; Hippler, 2009). While financial and career benefits are highly relevant, their roles may not be as important as might have been expected in inducing IA participation at least in this particular group of young Chinese assignees. In the next chapter, the limited influence of both financial incentives and career prospects will be discussed and the contextual factors of making IA decisions will be further discussed in Chapter Seven.

5.5.2 Right Time

A significant number of participants (17) made comments ascribing the decision to accept an IA to life and career timing, which led to the coding theme of the ‘right time’. The frequency of this theme was such as it was initially categorised as a dominant motivation. However, further examination of the interview data suggested that the theme was almost part of the process of motivation as much as a reason. It is also a significant aspect of Marshall’s belief that timing is part of ‘communion’ (2006). So in this sense, being the right time involves balancing different factors (motives) according to the participants’ understanding of their specific stage of life or career. Many of the references to timing in this study are about the ‘rightness’ of other factors such as adventure and challenge. Therefore, the timing factor was considered as a subsidiary motive.

Some element of the theme of being the right time was linked to career stage and age. A significant feature of this theme is that the right time referred to the early stage of career development. Examples to demonstrate this are:

I was a recent graduate [from university], so it was a good time for me to go on the IA. It was great to start high at the beginning of my career.
(male, IT)

The timing was right for the opportunity, because I hadn’t put too much effort into developing my career yet within the organisation. I don’t think I would have accepted this assignment if I had my foundation such as guanxi stabilised within the company (male, management).

An important part of establishing and maintaining one's career is continuous investment in career capital (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Participants acknowledged that being away on assignment meant that they might experience temporary departures from the process as well as the challenges of adjusting back to the original context. Being at the early stage of their careers meant that the loss to their existing career capital (including guanxi) was minimised. This outlined the importance of 'context' for career capital development (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). Chapter Seven will provide further analysis on the contextual factors of career capital development and how they affect the perceived value of international experiences.

For some participants, the right time was also explicitly related to age:

I took advantage of being young right now, so go and see the world.
(male, IT)

It was the right time in my life as I was young and unmarried. I don't think I would make the same decision if I had a family. (male, marketing)

I am still young, so it is a valuable experience to challenge myself.
(female, IT)

Hence, participants related age to personal (non-work) characteristics and responsibilities as well as career stage. It appeared that being young reinforced the desire for, or relevance of, adventure and challenge. It is well established that young generations have higher international mobility (Thorn, 2009b), partly because they have

fewer family issues. Super's (1980) life space theory defines seven different roles in one's life and as people mature, the number of roles (responsibilities), and perceived obligations of different generations increase. In the context of making an IA decision, being young means assignees have fewer responsibilities whether as spouse, homemaker or parent, and have more freedom to focus on personal development and satisfaction. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that individual perceptions of age (characteristics and values) vary in different cultural contexts (Brown, 1990; Selmer, 2009). Cultural differences need to be taken into account by researchers engaged in trying to understand age-related managerial issues in an international context. Chapter Six will reveal 'redefined' perceptions of age based on participants' evaluations of self, others and the context.

5.5.3 Money

Fifteen participants indicated that financial benefits were considered to be a bonus to the international experience, rather than a primary consideration. It was initially surprising to see the subsidiary role of money considering Chinese assignees are often paid three to five times more than those working in China (Shen, 2006), and a traditional image of an IA is that the decision is made because of the push factors such as high salaries (Hailey, 1996). Participants explained that although money was an important factor, it tended to be subsidiary to other more dominant factors such as self-satisfaction and the need for personal development.

It was not completely because of money, although the financial side of things was attractive, I paid more attention to personal development.
(male, IT)

No, I accepted it [IA] because I wanted to get more than just money from the experience. (male, marketing)

It is important to acknowledge that for some people and some cultures (such as China), money is a sensitive issue to discuss. Participants' personal accounts may be influenced by how they want to be seen by others (Lee, 1993). It may have been that these participants did not want to be seen as mercenaries, having accepted an IA for purely financial reasons. Also, the effects of money may be limited because participants are relatively young and have fewer financial responsibilities, and assignments tend to be of short-term duration. However, further analysis of their IA experience confirms that, despite the high pay of assignments, participants had a strong willingness to return home and/or were reluctant to consider another IA (also see Chapter Six [6.5]).

The findings presented here are instructive for a number of reasons. First, financial incentives are often used to attract assignees to accept an IA, particularly to less desirable locations (Hippler, 2009), but the perceived impact of financial benefits may be short-term and the realisation of other negative factors may result in withdrawal from an IA. Second, they point to the significance of contextual factors and how they come together to influence the decision to go. For example, expatriating for financial reasons may be connected with being single and having more freedom to pursue personal goals. The findings emphasise the value of exploring individual interpretations of the decision

in order to allow individuals to speak for themselves rather than imposing conventional assumptions which may not reflect the complexity of the individual IA decision-making process.

5.6 The Interdependency of Motives

Career capital is a useful framework for analysing the findings. On the whole, the literature suggests that overall career capital development serves as a motivation for accepting an IA, for example, by developing technical or cultural knowing-how, enhancing knowing-whom capacity and gaining deeper personal understanding of knowing-why (Haines et al., 2008; Hippler, 2009; Makela & Suutari, 2007). However, the findings here suggest a more intricate and fine-grained effect between the three ways of knowing. Figure 5.5 overlays each way of knowing over the themes discussed thus far.

While, as discussed earlier, both knowing-how and knowing-whom had an effect over IA decision-making, their significance is limited. For example, participants expected certain development of knowing-how such as language skills, but they also considered the experience more in terms of practicing their existing skills. Similarly, while respecting managers' decisions are important, it is only valid when personal expectations can also be fulfilled.

Knowing-why however, was considered to have a more significant function in participants' overall expectations and was directly linked to personal growth, an

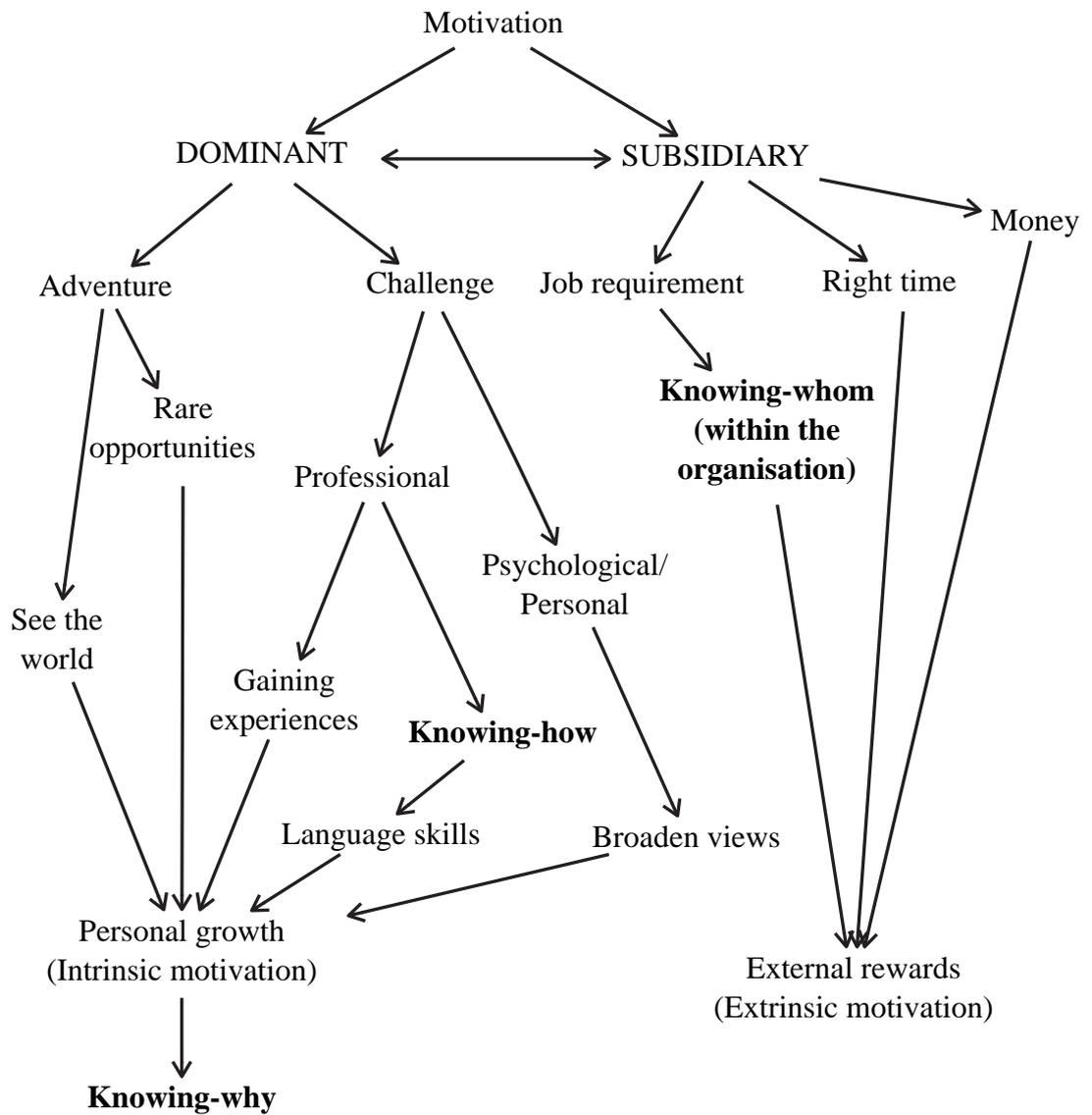


Figure 5.5. Overview of IA Decision-making: The Role of Career Capital

intrinsic motivation. For example, the dominant themes of both adventure and challenge are related to improved status and reputation. The appreciation of the IA opportunity was affected by the perception that international experiences may link to improved status or image by others, even if indirectly. For example,

It was an enviable opportunity. Lots of people wanted it but I got it so I was very happy and excited. (female, software support)

In my opinion, if I got the [IA] opportunity, it means I have something that others don't have. I think that makes me excited and pushes me to want more. (male, marketing)

I am not often an adventurous person, but the feeling of being on top of the crowd made me want to try something new, a lot of my friends have never been to other countries, so when I had the opportunity, it made me feel happy. (male, engineering)

The judgement of increased status or privilege was based on assignees' own assessments and suggests that *individual satisfaction* (or desires to feel satisfied) was important in an IA motivation. Their perceptions of the benefits of IAs were not limited to their positions within the organisation but also focused on their wider social roles and experiences as 'travelers, consumers, spouses, parents, partakers of recreation and leisure' (Inkson et al., 1997, p.357). These added roles, as a result of international experience, provided them with a sense of satisfaction and self-esteem within their social groups and therefore helped motivate them to seek or accept an IA.

To understand this self-perceived satisfaction further, this study draw on the literature on sense-making and particularly the notion of 'narrative thought' (Glanz et al., 2001, p. 103). Weick (1995, p. 20) suggests 'the sense-maker is himself or herself an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which 'self' is appropriate'. In this regard, sense-making is a social

construct, and a process of assessing self, others and the relationships with others, in order to determine the benefits and drawbacks of individual behaviours and actions such as IA decisions. To take one example of sense-making:

I think how other people think about me is quite important. I know it is quite shallow ... but you can't take yourself out of the society. And I want to make my family proud. (male, IT)

Personal growth, an intrinsic motivation, was an important factor in influencing participants' perception of IA decisions. Their sense-making of an IA opportunity was directly linked to how its value affected themselves, their families and social image. Further, as far as sense-making is concerned, plausibility is more important than accuracy in influencing action (Weick, 1995). In the absence of accurate information, sense will be made on the basis of available information (Glanz et al., 2001). For example, many participants had no prior IA experiences, therefore, their initial assessments of IA opportunity were based on the perceived outcomes they wished to achieve. Hence, as discussed earlier, the dominant motives were implicit focusing mainly on psychological/intrinsic satisfaction such as challenge and adventure. While external rewards such as financial benefits and it being the right time were important, these extrinsic motivations only played a subsidiary role in an individual's IA decision-making.

The relevance of knowing-why in participants' decisions to accept an IA can also be understood from the perspective of subjective success. In this regard, career success is

operationalised by variables that measure subjective or intrinsic career success (Judge et al., 1995). Such variables capture individuals' subjective judgments about their professional attainments, such as job and career satisfaction (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2004). Career success, in either an objective or subjective way, remains an inadequate area in the IA literature. The findings here suggest that subjective satisfaction such as improved social status is the primary motivation for accepting an IA for the Chinese assignees. Objective terms such as financial benefits and technical skill development are important only when they are perceived to make a contribution in this subjective way. This confirms the instinctive nature of IA decision-making as a process of evaluating possible subjective returns from various aspects including personal, family, career, organisational and social domains. Chapter Seven will examine these factors with a more specific focus.

The findings also go beyond the simple bipolar objective-subjective divide (e.g., Abele & Spurk, 2009; Kohonen, 2005; Ng et al., 2004) towards a more multi-faceted approach when analysing career success. The richness of themes emerging when asking participants for their views on IA motivation seems to indicate a more dynamic, interdependent definition of career satisfaction and success. For example, the social recognition of the IA value is through self-actualisation and interactions with others (Mayrhofer et al., 2012). Individual satisfaction (knowing-why) is determined by various factors including IA destination, job position, material output, personal achievement and organisational influences. The academic implication is that the investigation of IA motivations should employ a dynamic and multi-dimensional

perspective. While the current understanding of reasons for accepting an IA provides a useful list of possible motives (e.g., Dickmann et al., 2008; Haines et al., 2008; Pinto et al., 2012; Seger et al., 2008), they only capture the quantifiable measurements of decision-making. Utilising the framework of career capital, this study found an interdependency between these factors from a qualitative angle. The implications for MNCs are that some of the objective incentives such as financial benefits may not be important in assignees' motivations or their relevance may be transient. It may be more appropriate to consider wider subjective satisfaction factors, such as personal development and cultural experiences, that assignees could receive from an IA.

5.7 Summary

This chapter focuses on the motivations behind accepting an IA. Numerous key factors are identified, some of which, such as financial benefits, personal and knowing-how development, are widely acknowledged in the literature (Dickmann et al., 2008; Haines et al., 2008). Others, such as being the right time, adventure and job requirement, are relatively new in company-backed IA studies. IA is found to be a multiple, complex decision-making process, with dominant and subsidiary categories of factors. It is found that some factors such as see the world and rare opportunity have direct push effects for the decision-to-go, while others such as job requirement, being the right time and financial benefits have weaker functions in the process. It is argued that IA decision-making is an evaluation of the balance between personal, organisational and social factors (also see Chapter Seven).

Finally, this chapter discussed the interdependency of IA motives. Participants often gave more than one reason, and some had subsidiary reasons for accepting an IA. The chapter uses the framework of career capital to suggest that subjective satisfaction (knowing-why) in the broader sense, is the major return participants expect from an IA. Contrary to literature suggesting assignees accept a company-backed IA for objective reasons such as knowing-how and knowing-whom development (Hippler, 2009; Pinto et al., 2012; Vo, 2009), the argument here is that knowing-why factors such as improved status and broadening personal views are more relevant in individual motivation for Chinese IAs. The importance of self and how the value of international experiences may contribute to Chinese assignees' perceived organisational and social image are important elements of individual motive. The chapter also points to the contributions of various objective factors to perceived personal satisfaction. For example, language competencies (which are often inadequately discussed in IA literature) are an important knowing-how that participants wanted to develop.

Having explored the motives for an IA, Chapter Six now examines participants' experiences during posting. It also addresses participants' accounts of the changes of career capital.

Chapter Six

Experiences during an IA

Without stirring abroad, one can know the whole world; Without looking out of the window, one can see the way of heaven. The further one goes, the less one knows.

-- Lao Tzu

6.1 Introduction

This, the second of the findings and analysis chapters, focuses on the individual experience during an IA, and addresses the following research objectives:

- To determine the most salient themes in participants' experiences of an IA;
- To identify how participants perceive the positive and negative aspects of an IA;
and
- To understand how participants interpret various dimensions of career capital during an IA.

To discuss the dynamic nature of career capital and continuity of the IA experience, this chapter is structured in the following way. First, the adjustment process is explored in terms of emerged key themes, focusing on participants' accounts of issues and difficulties as derived from the NVivo template analysis. Second, key themes on satisfaction are analysed aiming to understand participants' evaluations of both

fulfillment and things they would like to acquire. Specifically, changes in motivations are discussed and compared to factors for accepting an IA that are outlined in Chapter Five. Third, social integration is the focus with detailed examination of participants' evaluations on their roles, relationships and connections with the company and China. At the end of the Chapter, themes are drawn together using constructs of career capital. Discussions focus on the dynamic and complex nature of each dimension of career capital.

6.2 Overview

As noted in Chapter Two, despite an extensive body of literature regarding IAs, there is little known about individual experiences and the perceived impacts from an IA, especially in the case of Chinese IAs. Most studies focus on the process of initial adjustment and often depend on international assignees' post-experience narratives alone (e.g., Andreason, 2008; Dunbar, 1992; Haslberger & Brewster, 2009; Lee & Liu, 2006; Shay & Baack, 2004). This chapter focuses on international assignees' accounts of their IA experience while they are still in the midst of them. Although the writing of this chapter involved participants' reflections and evaluations, they were still living abroad and the data have an active focus of sense-making for themselves, others and the situation (Weick, 1995). This will be explored further in Chapter Seven.

Following the structure from the previous chapter, node trees are included. Figure 6.1 provides an overall structure outlining the main categories of findings. The nodes are

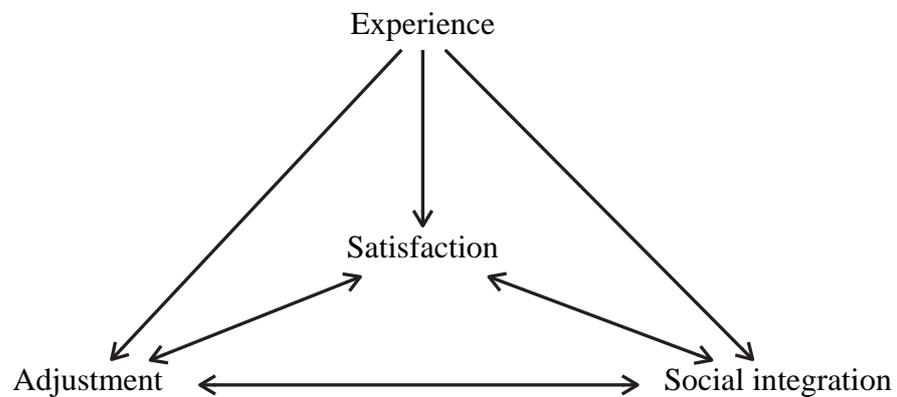


Figure 6.1. IA Experience

then gradually expanded reflecting more detailed findings. Where appropriate, findings will be compared with other studies in terms of their contribution to the literature. The chapter points to a number of key topics that contribute to the IA literature and to understandings of the IA experience specifically. IA experience is explored in categories of adjustment, satisfaction and social integration. While it is important to understand experience as an on-going process of events occurring during an IA (Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2000), the analytical categorisation helps understanding of the common patterns that matter the most to participants.

Like the previous chapter, this chapter identifies perceptions of changes in career capital during participants' IA experience and links key themes to each way of knowing. Some of the findings are in line with studies in this area whereas other findings confirm specific experiences related to Chinese organisational and social characteristics.

6.3 Adjustment

The first category of experience is the process of adjustment during an IA. While a considerable proportion of studies consider adjustment as outcomes related to assignment success (Black et al., 1991; Dunbar, 1992; Shay & Baack, 2004), others suggest that adjustment 'is not an end in itself ... adjustment and adaptation are relevant to IA job performance, probably only as determinants' (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1997, p. 80). If the latter position is taken, then information on both cultural and work-related adjustments given during IAs provides a useful insight into the understanding of relevant factors for improving job performance and individual satisfaction.

As would be expected, according to participants, this theme is particularly significant in the initial stages of their IAs, especially as discussed in Chapter Three, Chinese MNCs do not often provide pre-departure preparations such as a host destination introduction or cross-cultural training. The adjustment process (Figure 6.2) is discussed in terms of key themes, as articulated by participants themselves.

6.3.1 Language

The opportunity to learn English was a key motivating factor for accepting an IA. It was also discussed by participants when they were considering their IA experience and is therefore worthwhile considering in some depth. Almost all (28) of the 31 participants said that they enjoyed the internationalisation of the position and the opportunity to work in English. However, learning English was also raised as an adjustment issue. Some participants found that their English was not as effective as they had anticipated

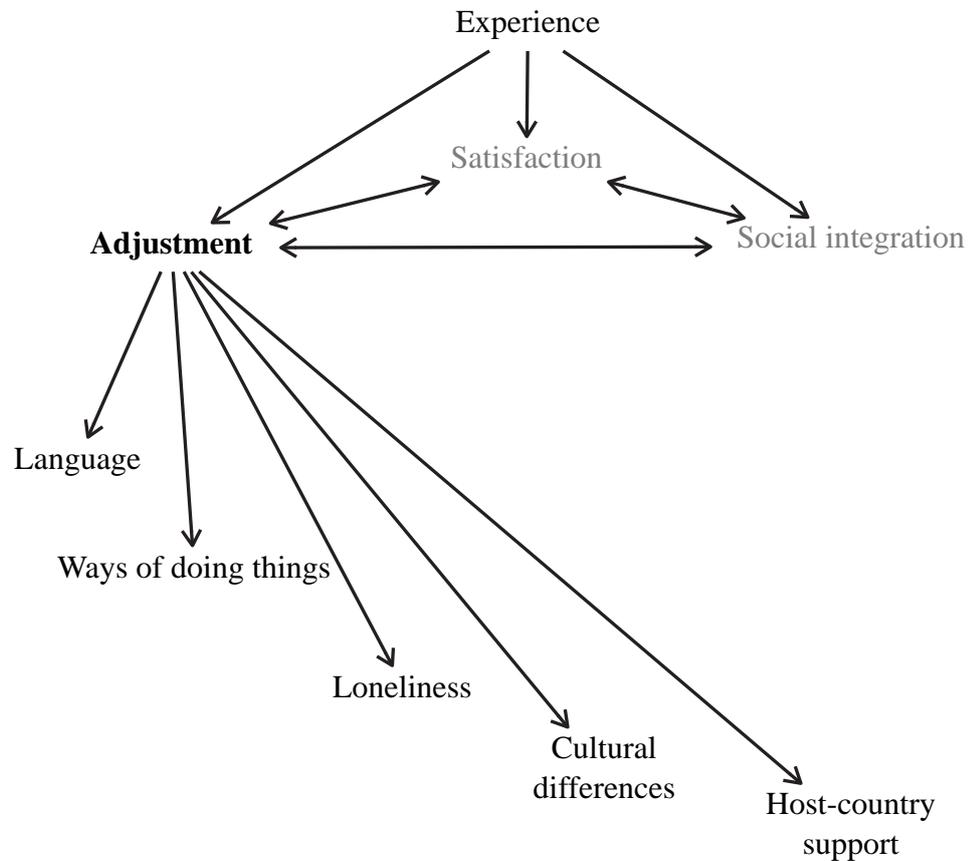


Figure 6.2. IA Adjustment

when faced with the often rapid and colloquial language of the native English speakers in the host destinations. Further, some found that there was technical jargon in the workplace that they had not been exposed to before:

Language. I think that was the most difficult at the beginning. Even though I thought I had reasonably good English, I never had the opportunity to actually use it, so it was quite a task for me to get used to the idea of using English. (male, marketing)

This finding concurs with what is outlined in the literature - language and communication issues are often challenging for international assignees, particularly in the early stages of IA adjustment (Andreason, 2008; Dunbar, 1992; Lee & Liu, 2006; Shay & Baack, 2004; Xu, 2009). In this study, despite the fact that participants often acknowledged limited English skills prior to their departure and had the desire to improve their English, they also found language difficulties had a negative influence on their satisfaction with the IA experience. Language issues are often considered as a barrier for international assignees to integrate into a new social environment, and the lack of social interaction may decrease an individual's willingness to experience new things. The findings added further evidence concerning the importance of language competencies in the process of IA adjustment and experience. Companies often invest little in training international assignees in language skills, and even less in coaching native speakers how to effectively communicate with their visitors.

The emphasis on language issues might also reflect the fact that participants understood there was limited room to develop skills other than language competencies, given the nature of their international placement. Again, organisational practices influenced assignees' perceptions of the value of international experience and what can be developed from an IA. This was not anticipated. While soft skills such as cross-cultural communication competencies are acknowledged as important competencies for global managers (Sheng, 2009; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Thomas & Inkson, 2004), they seem to be directed towards the importance of language as a motivation and experience in terms of career capital. The present findings emphasise the importance of

language, or more broadly, communication skills, for people who work in different countries. Use of language not only determines how effectively international assignees implement their work tasks in a direct sense, but also influences the effectiveness of IA adjustment and their satisfaction within a new social environment (Xu, 2009).

The findings also confirm that, in the Chinese context, English language skills are highly desirable. The increasing collaboration between China and the West, and increased mobility (either company-backed or self-initiated), means that language skills are becoming an increasingly important competency and currency in long-term career capital accumulation, since, in the highly competitive Chinese job market, English skills may increase employability (Stanat, 2005). Also, the significance in cultural terms is that foreign language skills are increasingly considered as socially desirable and associated with higher status and educational background (Xu, 2009). Although English teaching has been an essential part of the Chinese education system since the 1980s, limited practice makes it difficult to maintain a high level of efficacy. An IA is therefore recognised as a valuable opportunity to practice language skills and improve fluency:

I never had the opportunity to practice my English in China after graduating from university. I always wanted to improve it. (male, marketing)

At the beginning of the IA, I was hardly able to speak English in full sentences but now I am much more fluent and confident talking to people. I also learnt to write letters and emails in English which I had not done before. (male, IT)

Nevertheless, the reason that language is considered in the category of adjustment is that despite appreciation of the opportunity to improve their language skills, participants often reported limited technical improvement because English was only used at work, and in narrow circumstances, so a low level of fluency was sufficient to meet job requirements:

Most of the time [at work], I can use Chinese with my co-workers. I only need to speak English when I deal with customers or partners. It's quite easy after a while, because you use the same words and sentences again and again. I seldom use English after work. I stay with other Chinese assignees. I also like to watch Chinese TV programmes on my laptop. (female, software support)

While it is reasonable to expect that the level of English efficacy is related to the duration of the overseas assignment, the cross-comparisons between short-term and long-term assignees found no differences in their perceptions of the value of language skills. Assignees may develop greater English competency from a longer assignment, which might help the job during an IA, but they do not consider language skills as an essential criterion (if desirable) for career progression. Its perceived value turns out to be less than what they originally anticipated at the start:

When I go back to China, I do not think I will get a lot of use from my English skills because Mandarin will be the only language that is required within the organisation. (male, IT)

[English] is mainly for work. I think I am able to use it properly in work related communication. But I don't really have expectations of other uses. (male, management)

The anticipated 'status enhancement' is thereby developed over time. In their minds, English skills are a 'nice to have' instead of an 'essential requirement' for career progression. Their understanding, in the Chinese context, is that career progression is dependent on the overall value of career capital instead of each individual component of knowing (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Improved English skills would not overcome the need to obtain other essential career factors, in particular, knowing-why and knowing-whom capital.

Overall, the emphasis on English skills meant that it was considered a desirable individual competency. While participants did not expect significant skills development, as discussed in the previous chapter, they considered language as the most relevant because it could readily be obtained from the international experience. However, participants appeared to be frustrated in several ways. First, the opportunities for the development of language competency were less than originally anticipated. Second, and relatedly, they became increasingly aware that, these skills would not necessarily translate into enduring benefits. The benefits of language competency could be dissipated on return, and at the cost of distance from home country connections on assignment. Hence, their comments on its limited value in career progression indicated how career outcomes or success became perceived as not depending on one component of knowing but a series of knowing and how these function within a specific context.

The findings here suggest the importance of understanding the interdependency between the three ways of knowing and the need to focus on contextual factors from individual, organisational and social dimensions. Chapter Seven discusses the contextual view of career capital further.

6.3.2 Ways of Doing Things

From day-to-day tasks and interactions with business partners and customers, international assignees perceived many differences in management and business practices. For example, several participants expressed the view that there was a better working environment at the overseas subsidiary.

I am not under the surveillance of my supervisors or managers all the time [like in China] so it is quite a relaxing working environment ... It is also not so competitive. It is more straightforward to deal with business partners here. I don't have to worry about interpersonal relationships too much. (male, marketing)

The working style is different here. People [customers and Western working partners] are more direct and it is easier to get things done. When people say yes, they mean it ... unlike in China you never know what people really mean. (male, project management)

Similar to their language competency, this theme is considered as adjustment because it is mainly to do with learning to suit the local context. However, despite participants' appreciation of certain practices used in the host country subsidiaries, they did not

consider these understandings as valuable and enduring developmental factors for future careers:

I think it is more for survival in the current situation. You have to learn to understand how things work here but I don't really think it has much use for my future. For example, if I end up at another IA location, I have to start learning their ways of doing things. (male, project management)

Individual perceptions are thus fundamental in understanding the value of career competencies and selecting what is relevant for career development. This finding confirms the notion that careers are owned by individuals (Briscoe et al., 2005; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). In this study, participants make sense of the IA context and determine what is the relevant knowing that is desired from an international experience. It is however, important to note that the *context* of sense-making is not limited to an individual level (such as personal development and satisfaction). Their understandings of their roles associated with their families, organisations, and the wider society are critical for making appropriate career decisions. These interplays between contextual factors are further analysed in detail in Chapter Seven.

6.3.3 Loneliness

While family issues were not identified as a major factor affecting participants' motivation for the IA, comments pointed to the importance of family and how family issues affected their actual IA experience. Loneliness, as a result of being away from

family and friends, was particularly clear at the initial stage of IA adjustment. One comment summarised this clearly:

Of course I missed home and particularly my parents. The new environment meant I had to make new contacts. I didn't know anyone here so it was quite a lonely experience for me. (male, IT)

However, it was also indicated that the intensity of loneliness decreased over time. Participants were forced to carry on their daily routines and personal issues such as missing their families in China became less relevant.

Slowly, it became part of the daily life. I wouldn't say I don't miss my family anymore, but it [the loneliness] no longer bothers me that much. (male, marketing)

I think the pace of everyday work let's you forget the lonely feeling. I don't really have time to think about it anymore. Besides, I can always ring them [my parents]. (female, IT)

Unlike Western international assignees who are often accompanied by partners and children (Fish & Wood, 1997), Chinese participants (who tend to be young), as suggested by several studies (e.g. Selmer, Ebrahimi, & Li, 2000; Shen, 2006), were sent out alone, so it was therefore not surprising to see loneliness as a major issue in the process of adjustment. In comparison to the literature, the finding here offers different insights to the adjustment process. First, 'missing my parents' was the dominant theme in the topic of loneliness. The unique Chinese social structure, which is influenced by the one-child policy and collectivistic cultural norms, meant participants had strong

emotional and social responsibilities to look after their parents. Being away seemed to challenge their social roles and duties and intensify the feeling of loneliness. It was also rather compelling to observe the dominant role of family (parents) in participants' IA experiences compared to its limited influence on their initial motivation for accepting a posting. Many of the participants who did not consider family issues when accepting an IA, felt a strong sense of family responsibilities during an assignment. This indicated the dynamic nature of individual motivations and perceptions (Pinto et al., 2012). What was not important could become important in a different situation. Being away from the home context made participants realise the importance of factors that they may not have considered initially.

6.3.4 Cultural Differences

The clear cultural differences between China and the West were outlined by an abundance of comments. While culture is conventionally viewed as a collective mindset (Hofstede, 1980), participants evaluated the cultural differences based on their own experiences:

I think the impact [of cultural differences] was there, particularly at age 25, my value system has been formed. The exposure to a new environment definitely challenged what I believed. I think the first difference is the meaning of interpersonal relationships between the East and the West. For example, I think family ties and affection between family members are much stronger in China. The second is the attitude towards tolerance. I think China is quite far behind in this aspect. I was

very conservative when I first arrived and found it difficult to accept new things. But then I realised people still accept me when I made mistakes. They were willing to help me without asking for anything in return. (male, management)

I think the main difference is that the pressure is much less here [in the UK]. At my age [27], if I was in China, family members will ask ‘when are you going to get married? Do you have a boy friend?’- all these kinds of personal questions. But here, people give you enough space and privacy so you don’t have to worry about these kinds of things. (female, IT)

Cultural differences were often mentioned alongside language difficulties when participants were probed further. As part of a society’s artifact, language is the first and a more obvious level of culture, a way of establishing and displaying group identity (Schein, 1980). A community's ways of communication are a part of the community's culture, just as are other shared practices. Participants’ comments pointed to the link between language and culture, and most especially the need to be familiar with a specific language in order to understand the culture:

Obviously, language was the first thing I noticed when I first arrived. If you don’t speak the language, you would be always a foreigner or tourist. Even now, I am confident in using English in daily communication, I found it hard to have a true grasp of what the local culture is. I think it is to do with my English ability. (male, IT)

Participants talked of being ‘observers’ rather than ‘practitioners’, a divide exacerbated by the significant cultural differences between China and the West (Hofstede, 2001).

Developing a deep understanding of a new culture is intrinsically challenging (Chen et al., 2010; Lee & Sukoco, 2010; Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown, & Johnson, 2004). In this case, cultural immersion was also bound by the temporary nature of the assignment. The Chinese assignees saw little value in attempting to manufacture an international identity for their future career development. In this study, participants did not have high expectations in this regard:

Good or bad, it has nothing to do with me. I am Chinese, so I think understanding the Chinese culture is more important. (male, marketing)

I don't think I had any desire to understand the new culture deeply. For me, having some understanding that can help my work and make my living a bit easier is enough. (male, IT)

In general, participants had a reasonably clear understanding of their future career orientation and many of them considered the IA as a temporary life experience.

6.3.5 Host-Country Support

Working on an IA not only involved adjustment to the new working environment, but also a new social context. Host-country support is therefore vital. This may include personal arrangements such as setting up bank accounts and familiarisation with transportation and everyday matters such as shopping. All participants expressed that they had received adequate local support which helped them to adjust to the new environment reasonably effectively, so that they could focus more on job performance.

As soon as I arrived in the UK, there was someone waiting for me at the airport. She had prepared my accommodation and arranged a corporate ID card for me. It was particularly helpful when I had no idea where to start. So I think my company did really well in this respect. (female, IT)

The local support was really good, you don't really need to worry about your personal life if you don't want to experience the city. Our company offers free accommodation shared with other assignees and free meals prepared by our allocated chef. (male, marketing)

While organisational support such as assistance upon arrival and offering help finding accommodation are widely acknowledged in the literature (Lee & Liu, 2006; Lee & Van Vorst, 2010; Stroppa & Spiess, 2011), the Chinese MNCs seemed to offer much more systematic and encompassing local support. Free accommodation and meals were offered by all participants' companies and some companies even offered regular bus shopping tours and cultural gatherings. It was clear that Chinese MNCs intended to eliminate as many practical obstacles as possible in order to maximise IA effectiveness. In this study, participants' organisations sought to provide a cultural safe net by accommodating and supporting assignees together. This, however, has some restrictive implications for cross-cultural exposure and therefore social integration. Section 6.5 discusses these implications further.

In terms of managing the effectiveness of adjustment, the focus of participants and their organisations was on maintaining a familiar cultural environment. The collectivistic nature of Chinese culture seemed to be an important factor for this protective approach to helping participants settle in a foreign country successfully. This is contrary to most

findings in similar studies on Western MNCs which often encourage assignees to integrate into the local social context (e.g., Lee & Van Vorst, 2010; Stroppa & Spiess, 2011). It may be relevant to explain the contrary findings from differences in perceived value of career capital (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Newburry & Thakur, 2010). For some (Western) assignees and their organisations, new social contacts are considered as valuable capital for future career and organisational development. For example, in their study, Cappellen and Janssens (2008) argue that new international networks are an important asset for assignees and the successful implementation of organisational international strategies. However, in this study, these potential networks were perceived as having limited value for participants' future careers. Some participants voiced the disadvantages of such an arrangement:

I had no chance to meet new people. I spent most of the time with other international assignees, yes, it was very convenient because I did not have to worry about dealing with lots of daily things but it was no different to working in China. What is the point of working in the UK when all I knew were Chinese international assignees? (male, IT).

There was, however, some intention of active engagement into the new social environment, explained in Section 6.5.

6.4 Satisfaction

The second category of themes was about individual satisfaction of IA experiences, as expressed in terms of a personal evaluation of expectations and IA realities. Overall, participants were satisfied with their IA experiences. Figure 6.3 shows key themes.

6.4.1 Technical Skills

A key theme from the findings was the limited improvement in technical competencies such as job or position related skills. As indicated earlier, this largely was a result of organisations' international strategies and human resource practices which, in the Chinese MNC context, focus largely on the implementation of requirements from headquarters (Shen & Edwards, 2006). Consequently, Chinese MNCs ensure international assignees are ready to implement international tasks with a clear functional orientation. For their part, the international assignees knew the IA would be within their capabilities and there was little expectation of learning new or different skills. There were however, some changes in terms of technical skills which were mainly related to the adjustment processes of new working environments. This entailed transferring existing skills to a new environment and adjusting to local conditions (Lee & Liu, 2006):

I learnt something new for the first month or so because it was a new environment. But soon after that, I was just doing the same thing again and again. (female, software support)

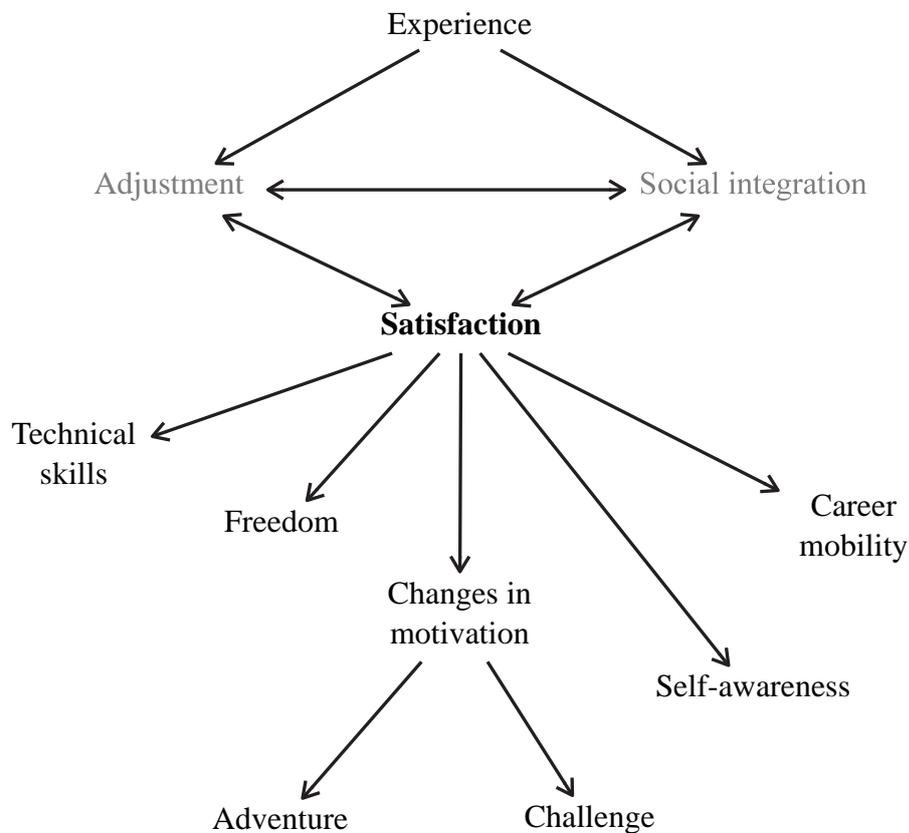


Figure 6.3. IA Satisfaction

If I wanted to improve my technical skills, it would have been better to stay in China where most of the training takes place. Our company often ensures they send someone who has the required skill sets. (male, project management)

The findings therefore offer a different insight into what is outlined in the general IA literature (but anticipated in the nascent research within Chinese MNCs) that international assignees develop job related knowing-how from IAs (Dickmann et al.,

2008; Jokinen, 2010). In this study, no significant technical knowing-how was expected to be developed from Chinese IAs.

Besides the limited developmental opportunities which were related to the specifically designed IA job tasks, the lack of knowing-how development was also affected by participants' perceptions of the value of technical skills and therefore their willingness to pursue active learning:

In terms of skills, when you go out [on an IA], even after three years, the skills you accumulate may not be as valuable as those if you had worked in China for that three years. Headquarters people don't know how practical and relevant your overseas experiences are in China.
(female, management)

In my case [as a marketing officer], the skills I have learnt from IAs such as interpersonal skills may not be useful at headquarters. If I choose to go back, I will need to know how to deal with people in the Chinese context. Employees would prefer people who have more local experience and are more skillful with Chinese clients. They won't trust me to deal with Chinese clients using Western ways that I have learnt.
(male, marketing)

Many of the comments were around the contextual value of skills development and many participants believed it would be difficult to transfer their skills back to the home organisational context. The cultural distance and structural disintegration between headquarters and subsidiaries, despite efforts to centralise control, seemed to influence the perceived transferable value of new skills.

It would be difficult [to transfer skills]. There are lots of technical but also political issues. Managers back home don't want the headquarter to think that people from the subsidiaries are better than their own local people. (male, IT)

Some participants commented that this made it difficult to demonstrate their skills within the organisational context. In any case, rather than general career development, the focus was on the completion of tasks in the immediate role:

There is always someone better than you. For example, there are about 100 people doing the same thing as I do so I need to make sure I do my job properly. I know it is important to think about my future career but I don't really have the time to do it now. I just do my job at the moment. (female, IT)

You know, you will not necessarily get promoted because of the IA or the skills you develop from it. In order to shine in such a big company, it is important to know your role. I am just an insignificant person in the company so I don't think I want to put too much effort just to improve my skills. That doesn't help me, in my opinion. (male, engineering)

These perceptions were developed prior to IAs and international experiences had no effect in changing their understanding of the hierarchy. One example to demonstrate this is below:

Before that [IA], I already knew the big picture so I didn't have a high expectation [of the IA]. The more you expect, the more disappointed you may get, so it's better to be realistic. Besides, it is a great

opportunity to come out so what more do I need to ask for. (male, marketing)

The perceived value of IA and its effects on careers were influenced by the context that participants were in. Findings in this study confirm the complexity of individual experience during an IA. More specifically, the learning experience of an assignee is not only related to the nature of the international experience itself, but also how an assignee's organisation facilitates this process. The difficulties of utilising learning from IAs are evident in the literature (e.g., Crowne, 2009; Oddou, Osland, & Blakeney, 2009) and high individual expectations and personal dissatisfaction on repatriation often cause assignees to seek new opportunities (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Stroh, 1995). The findings confirm this but also indicate that Chinese international assignees tend to be conservative in making their career decisions preferring to stay with their company. For example,

I don't think I will go to another company just because of an unsatisfactory repatriation position. I will have to look at other factors. (male, marketing)

I will leave if I can find a good opportunity, but I am more reluctant to make that decision. I don't think it would be much different in other companies. (male, engineering)

Hence, on the whole, participants emphasised difficulties in applying their international experiences to their home organisational context, and as a result, IAs were seen to have little value (even regressive value) for individual progression within the organisation.

6.4.2 Freedom

Participants frequently compared their IA experience with their working environment in China. Freedom was a key word summarising the differences. For example,

I have much more freedom working here than in China. In China, you know, you were always under the watch of your managers, so the pressure was really high. Working over time was a common thing there. If the manager stayed there until 9 pm then you would need to stay till 9 pm. But here, I never need to worry about working over time. I usually finish at 5 sharp. (male, IT)

Freedom. The stress is much lower here. I think it is to do with the organisational culture. In China, the environment was very competitive so it gave people pressure to work hard. But here, you still need to work hard, but the pressure is not that intensive. (male, marketing)

An important explanation of these differences was that international assignees were away from the home-country managers' direct supervision. Participants used a Chinese proverb '*tian gao huangdi yuan*' (translated as heaven is high, and the emperor is far away) to describe their temporary departure from headquarters' management radar. As a new member of the subsidiary team and often understood as a provisional employee, local managers would not put too much pressure on them. Also relevant are the hierarchical characteristics of Chinese MNCs (Shen, 2006). Working at the headquarters or home-country operations of Chinese MNCs which have high hierarchical structures can be more stressful than working in the smaller overseas subsidiaries with flatter and less bureaucratic structures resulting in greater personal satisfaction.

6.4.3 Motivation

Although some participants found the adjustment process challenging, most repeated it was also part of the adventure and challenges that they were looking for. When participants arrived at the host destination, the ‘unknown’ began to unfold and the key motivating factors for accepting an IA became reality.

Yes, it was quite hard at the beginning, particularly as I had to become familiar with so many things all together, but at the same time, I found it was quite fun. Well, that’s what I came here for, isn’t it? (female, IT).

The most enjoyable part was that there were always new things happening every day. It was like an adventure - difficult and exciting.
(male, IT)

The findings therefore suggest that some of the difficulties can also be positive aspects of the IA experience if assignees are motivated by adventure and challenge. Hence, individual perceptions shape evaluations of the good and bad aspects of IA experiences, and determine individual satisfaction.

6.4.4 Career Mobility/Directions

It emerged that major career-related motivations included perceived changes in personal characteristics, better assessment of participants’ strengths and weaknesses, and developing certain aspects of personality (e.g., becoming more flexible, open to new things, and non-judgmental in situations):

I am more mature than before. (male, software developer)

An old Chinese saying: ‘*du wanjuanshu buru xing qianlilu*’¹. The more I see, the more it changes the way I think. And it has changed my views on how to look at things in the future. (male, management)

The international experience has broadened my views. I realise there are many different ways of doing things now. (female, IT)

However, contrary to the literature suggesting that international assignees develop new understandings of self and the career from IAs such as maintaining international aspects in future careers (Kohonen, 2005; Makela & Suutari, 2007), Chinese assignees experienced fewer changes in *career* motivation during IAs. For example, nearly half of the participants said they had no clear direction concerning the next move:

Career plan? hmm ... I don't have many ideas at the moment, My plan is to do what I am doing. But the future? I am not so sure yet. Just see what will happen. (male, project management)

I always wanted to see the world. Now, I had the opportunity but I don't think I am strong enough to make any changes. (female, IT)

This finding may be due to the fact that participants are relatively young (at least compared to most studies of Western assignees) and therefore they may have lower expectations during the early stage of their careers. Age or life stage is an important

¹ A Chinese traditional proverb literally meaning ‘you can know more by traveling thousands of miles than by reading thousands of books’. It was used here by the participant to show his learnings in terms of knowing-why from the international experience.

factor for determining individual perceptions of the value of IAs and its impact is further discussed in the next section.

6.5 Social Integration

The last category of highlighted IA experiences was social integration, which refers to the principles by which individuals are related to one another in a society or group (Lockwood, 1964). It is particularly relevant when an outsider, such as an international assignee, attempts to make sense of a new environment and finds ways to (or not to) merge into the new society. It is in line with the concept of acculturation (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985) which explains the process of cultural and psychological change that results from a meeting between cultures (Sam & Berry, 2010). Despite the use of the word ‘integration’, there is no assumption that the relationships so described are harmonious. The terms social integration can embrace both order and conflict. Key themes are organised and presented in Figure 6.4. The following sub sections explore this in more detail.

6.5.1 Cultural Learning

While participants did not have high expectations for the development of skills such as improved understanding and sensitivity of different cultures (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Kraimer et al., 2009), they felt that they became more comfortable in dealing with different people:

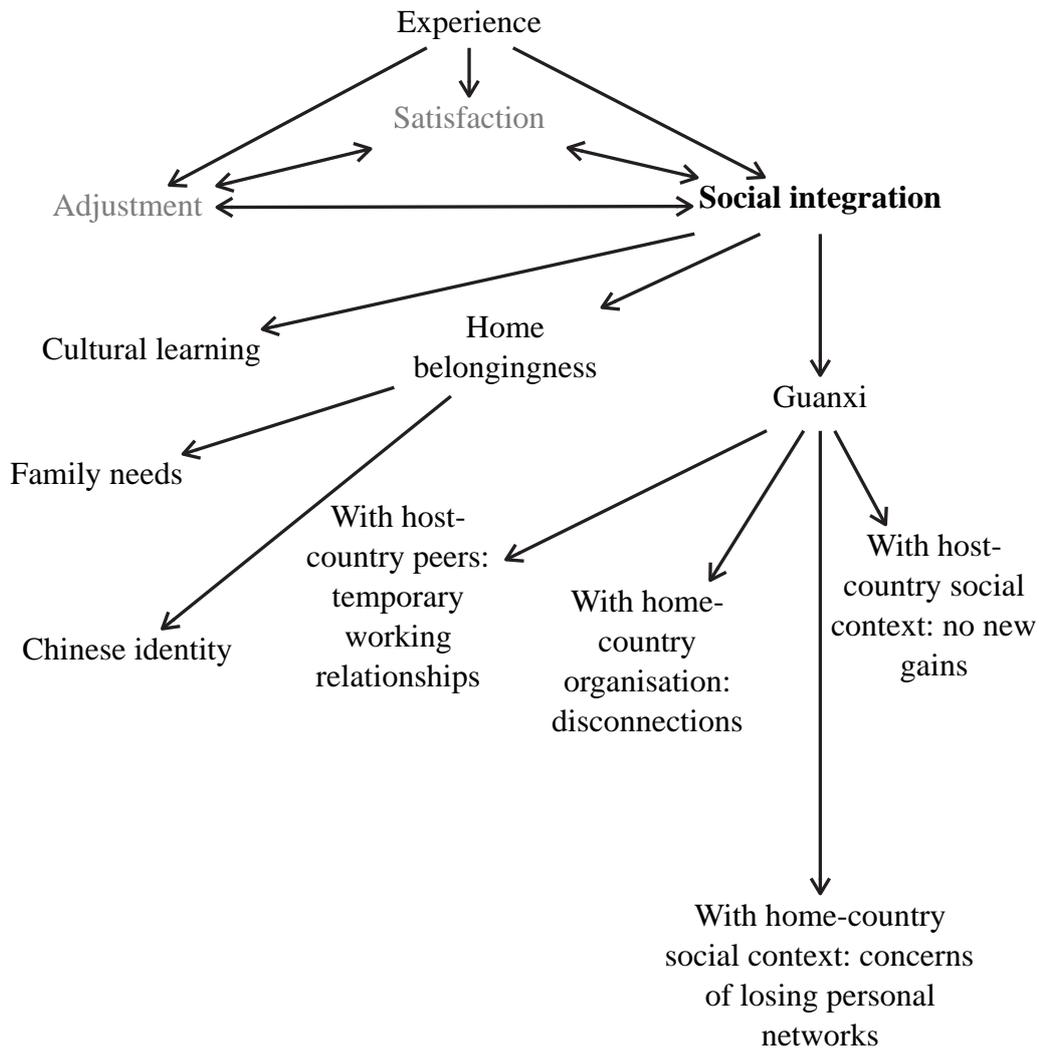


Figure 6.4. Perceived Social Integration during an IA

People skills, I think. I had more chances than before working with different types of people. I think it's to do with the nature of international work. Before, my work interactions were mainly within a small group of people in the company. But now, I have more opportunities to meet a wide range of people. (male, marketing)

Prior to the IAs, participants did not have opportunities to interact with people from other cultural contexts so the international experiences added cross-cultural interaction to their knowing-how. This is in line with other studies, which indicate that IAs provide important cultural experiences to international assignees so they become more flexible in different cultural contexts (Caligiuri & Di Santo, 2001; Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Kuijpers et al., 2006; Makela & Suutari, 2009). Other studies also find that international assignees who have distinct cultural experiences are more likely willing to relocate though this is not confirmed in this study (Li & Scullion, 2010; Osland & Osland, 2005; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). When asked, assignees perceived that some of the newly developed cultural learning may face challenges in the Chinese context. For example:

After all, there are cultural differences. I don't think some of them [skills] will work in China. For example, in the UK, you can be quite frank with your opinions on whether a solution will work or not, but in China, you have to be very careful. People might not appreciate the fact that you are honest and direct. (male, IT)

Some participants also expressed the view that the cultural differences may restrict their opportunities to seek new employment.

I don't think I have advantages because of the international experience. Employers may prefer local workers as they have more localised competencies. As I said before, I really think the IA is a valuable personal journey. Career? Not really. (female, software support)

The perceived difficulties of new employment opportunities were partly due to the cultural and practical value of the IA. Another reason was due to the high expectations from some assignees. For example,

I have broadened my view, I think I am more capable of new challenges. Of course, I would be very disappointed if I lost a good job opportunity to someone who does not have similar [international experiences].
(male, marketing)

Most assignees however, tended to have more moderate expectations on the value of IAs:

If I decide to go onto another assignment then I think I will have more advantages compared to those who don't have international experience, but that's not what I want, so I accept the fact that I will need to work hard to meet the standard that local employers want. I understand I have been away for too long and I need time to catch up with other people.
(male, management)

It is thus important to acknowledge that the value of skills development such as cultural learning is determined not only by participants' own perceptions but also their understanding of what others (such as their organisations and potential employers) look for in terms of career capital.

6.5.2 Home Belongingness

Another group of themes were related to comments on participants' connections with their family members and China, therefore 'home belongingness' was used as the topic to represent human emotional needs to be an accepted member of a group and desire to belong to something greater than themselves (Fiske, 2004). While participants developed some contacts which were mainly work-related during IAs, their desire to maintain close relationships with China was profound. One participant put it as 'my heart will always be in China'. Participants' comments have shown a strong sense of willingness to go back to China. In fact, all of the participants, despite the various durations of their assignments, considered that their futures lay in China and had a desire to return to China after their assignments. Social ties played an important connection in their emotional belongingness (Chu, 2008). Many of the participants also indicated that they will not accept another assignment because they want to remain close to their family and develop career goals in the Chinese context.

I will always end up in China. I think this assignment might be the last one I want to have, at least at this stage of my life. I want to be in China. After being to many places, I think it [China] is not too bad. (male, IT support)

I think I definitely prefer to be in China [in the long-term]. I mean I have seen the world, and I think in many aspects, the experience has changed my views. But in comparison, the fact that I am Chinese and I want to go home is more important for me. (female, IT)

I know it won't be easy to adjust my career back in China but to me, those disadvantages are not that significant. I will adjust to the environment. (male, management)

Several key factors, individually and culturally, were found to be relevant to home belongingness and are discussed below.

Family Needs

Individual motivations are dynamic; while the importance of one factor decreases, other factors become more relevant and important. In Chapter Five, participants often made their IA decisions because it was 'the right time', meaning that they have fewer family responsibilities and more freedom to explore personal interests. However, during their IAs, when personal needs such as adventure and challenge had been met, family needs became more significant and influenced participants to re-evaluate this notion of right time. This confirmed the nature of an IA seems to be a process and series of sense-making of self, others and the context (Glanz et al., 2001):

I accepted this IA because of the high salary, I thought I can save money to buy an apartment in Beijing. Now, I don't really care about it anymore, I would rather get less money but stay with my family. Besides, with the current real estate climate [in Beijing], I will never save fast enough to buy an apartment. (female, IT)

This comment reflects different perceptions that the participant had according to the different context. When accepting an IA, she sensed the importance of financial benefits

as it was relevant to her desire to purchase a property. However, during the IA, other circumstances such as the need to be close to her family overtook the importance of financial benefits. The fact (real estate climate in Beijing) remains the same, but the changing conditions re-prioritise her needs and affect the process of sense-making. This emphasises the dynamic nature of the IA context.

The average age of participants is 27. While this may limit the diversity of comments, some findings offer new insights. An interesting common theme is that participants' own perceptions of their age are cultural specific:

I am getting older [at age of 27] so I am always under pressure to get married. My parents do not want me to stay in another country for the long term; they said other children my age have already got married. So I will go back permanently after this posting. (male, IT)

I am not young anymore [at the age of 30], so I need to think about starting a family. You are Chinese so you should know this! Every time I talk about this with European colleagues, they laugh at me. They always ask why I worry about getting married when I am only in my twenties ... [laugh] a lot of them are in their late thirties. But one day I need to go back to China, so I need to do things that other Chinese do. (male, software support)

Their perceptions of the significance of age was defined in terms of their relationships with family members, particularly their parents, in the Chinese cultural context:

I think family is more important to me now. I am no longer young so I need to think about responsibilities such as looking after my parents. I think this would be the key factor when I make a decision on whether to accept another IA. (male, IT, 27 years)

I think when you are far away from home, you begin to realise the responsibilities and family needs. I think at my age, I will put more focus on my family in the future. They are the most important to me. (male, management, 28 years)

Although family needs related to partners and children are widely acknowledged in studies (Lazarova, Westman, & Shaffer, 2010; Pinto et al., 2012), such needs related to assignees' parents are relatively unexplored in the literature. Understanding specific cultural and social characteristics is important when investigating Chinese assignees' IA experiences, and it is interesting to compare initial motivations on accepting an IA with participants' later evaluations of the more important aspects of their lives. In short, the physical distance intensified the desire to maintain their relationships and duties to their parents.

While there are few studies exploring Chinese definitions around age, the evidence is clear that participants' perceptions are influenced by Chinese culture. In Hofstede's (1991) model, Chinese culture is considered to have a long-term orientation and a low level of uncertainty avoidance. This implies that Chinese assignees have a tendency to make early plans for the future, but being away from the home country increased uncertainty around future arrangements such as marriage, and therefore intensified those needs associated with age. Furthermore, being a collective society in Hofstede's terms,

Chinese are very concerned about their social duties and responsibilities even when they are away from China. Chinese norms concerning the collective definition of personal responsibilities (e.g., doing certain things at different stages of life) seemed to be important when participants made their decisions.

The family-oriented collectivistic Chinese culture (Hofstede, 2001) influences participants to rethink their initial decisions and re-prioritise personal and family needs, especially when remote and largely isolated. Again, the individual experience during an IA was therefore dynamic and multi-dimensional (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). Personal interests which were initially considered as important became less relevant and perceptions were re-shaped by what was defined as important in their social roles. In this study, the findings indicate that during an IA, even and especially with a relatively young sample, family needs seemed to become more important than others such as personal and career needs. Parental obligations and potential settling down, were increasingly relevant. More than a third of participants were even willing to terminate the IA earlier, with a potential negative impact on their careers to meet perceived family needs:

I am actually thinking about quitting the job. Well, that's the only way to go back to China earlier. It is not because I am not happy about the experience. I appreciate every minute of it. But I could not forgive myself if I cannot fulfill my family responsibilities. (male, marketing)

I don't think I will accept another IA after this one. My parents don't really want me to go out again. They said I have done it once so it is

better to be closer to the family. I do understand their needs. It is not easy when their only son is on the other side of the world. (male, IT)

Chinese Identity

Similar to findings related to Chinese assignees' sense of familial obligation, participants also reported intensified social identity, defined as the portion of an individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group (Turner & Oakes, 1986). It is another relevant category of themes relating to home belongingness. Social identity is used to explain certain intergroup behaviours on the basis of the perceived status, legitimacy and permeability of the intergroup environment (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Being away from their home, participants developed a more intensified desire to define themselves and their roles in their original Chinese context. Being Chinese meant they were expected to do certain things at certain stages of their lives to follow their social duties. Some examples demonstrate this social identity:

At my age [28], most Chinese people are already married, so I am under the pressure to sort out my personal issues. Being in a foreign country won't help me to settle and start a family, so I think I am more likely to stay in China after this posting. (male, engineering)

Other children at my age [27] have married and have children so I need to do the same thing. I know 27 years of age here [in Australia] is really young and people are not under pressure to get married. But I am Chinese, so I need to understand what is expected of me by my peers. (male, IT)

Hence, the pressure expressed by participants was not only come from the parents but also the Chinese society in large. To do what other Chinese do seemed to be important to them. An interesting pattern here was the perceived strength and importance of social pressure to get married. While marriage status is often considered as an individual issue in Western societies, it has much wider implications in China. Due to the collectivistic cultural norms and family traditions from the Confucius beliefs (Fan, 1994), personal status is often associated with family and social roles. Being single at certain ages may challenge the family reputation and social identity, and therefore, despite (indeed, because of) being far away from their social peers, assignees felt under more pressure to fulfill their social duties. For example, being away from China made finding suitable partners more problematic and hence many participants became more concerned to return home. Age and the need to get married are seldom explored in the literature because (Western) assignees are commonly accompanied by partners and therefore, a large number of studies focus on partners' adjustment during an IA (e.g., Andreason, 2008; Konopaske, Robie, & Ivancevich, 2005; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). The findings here offer a new dimension to IA issues: it may be relevant to acknowledge and investigate younger assignees' personal needs such as starting a family, especially those from countries with traditional expectations of such.

These cultural sensibilities around family were exacerbated by considerations such as the one-child policy and the relatively limited provision of social welfare in China. Social influences such as doing the right thing and following the cultural norms around generational reciprocity thereby became even more important. In particular, 29 of the 31

participants who were the only children in their families found it challenging to fulfill their family duties while on IAs, with a direct impact on how they perceived the IA itself:

My parents are the most important to me at this stage of my life. Sometimes, I feel guilty to be this far away from them. They have given up lots of things for me, but I have left them to work on the other side of the world. The pressure sometimes is piling up to the point I just want to quit the job. (male, IT)

Hence, while other studies find that IAs may influence individual cultural identity as assignees develop a willingness to develop a more multi-cultural identity (Kohonen, 2005), the findings here confirm that Chinese culture played a dominant, and even increasing, role in shaping one's identity and orientation to work and family over time. In some situations, the multiple, newly developed cultural understanding and identities challenge the relationships with their important ones and the definition of self. Filial piety, as an essential part of Confucianism (McNaughton, 1974), is the important virtue and duty of respect, obedience, and care for one's parents and elderly family members.

I don't want other people to think I am an irresponsible son. China is different [to the West], the welfare system is still not adequate and I need to make sure to look after my parents when they need me. (male, management)

The social interpretation of one's role and how well he/she performs in the role therefore significantly affects one's career motivation and perceived career success.

At the end of the day, what's the purpose of career? It's not all about myself. I wouldn't be happy if I cannot fulfill their needs even if I get good money, a good job and a good future, I won't be happy. (male, IT)

This theme seemed to meet the conceptual interpretations of 'relational identity'. As Andersen, Chen and Miranda (2002, p. 160) express it, the 'self is relational—or even entangled—with significant others'. Self-esteem derives from 'intergroup comparisons, and the basic motivation is the welfare of the collective, placing a premium on common fate, cohesion, and group norms' (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007, p. 10). Indeed, it is relational identities that knit the network of roles and role incumbents together into a social system. Thus, international assignees may have a clear sense of what it means to be part of relational networks and this therefore guides them to make suitable career decisions.

These wider influences on self-identity emphasise the needs to understand career and IA in context (Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2007; Young et al., 1996). While career development from an IA is an individual journey, and a significant feature of this study is that it is based on the assignees' own perceptions of the journey, their stories cannot be completed without dynamic interactions with others. Hence, it is important to take an overall perspective to understand how contextual factors play their roles in IA and career development.

6.5.3 Guanxi

An important and dominant theme that emerged from this research is the influence of guanxi in the Chinese organisational context. According to Hofstede (2007), guanxi is

closely linked to specific Chinese cultural factors such as collectivism and long-term orientation. Guanxi, was, therefore, an important factor maintaining or deepening home belongingness. As indicated earlier, in the Chinese context, guanxi is often referred to as personal connections between two people in which one is able to prevail upon another to perform a favour or service (Luo, 1997). Having a good guanxi with managers and colleagues provides access to certain opportunities such as IAs and increases the chances of progression within the organisation:

Being liked [by managers] definitely helped me to get this IA opportunity. There were no formal procedures to select an employee (to go onto an IA), most of the time, managers decided who they want to send so of course they will choose someone they like. (female, IT)

Participants also frequently compared Chinese and Western relationships in this regard.

For example,

Guanxi is more simple here. People are more direct about what they think, unlike in China where people don't tend to say what they think. (male, marketing)

I think interpersonal relationships are quite different. This is reflected when dealing with business partners. One time, I took my UK colleague out for dinner and he was very surprised. But if it is in China, it would be very common to finalise the deal over the dinner table. (male, management)

Because of the more complex interpersonal relationships in China, participants understood that they needed to invest more in order to maintain their key guanxi networks. Again, Chinese culture seemed to play an important role in influencing their willingness to select and invest in important aspects of their personal resources.

The relevance of Chinese guanxi meant it was important for participants to maintain their connections with existing contacts. Being away however, can increase the difficulties of maintaining key guanxi. Although participants were often in frequent contact with staff at headquarters, including collaborating on tasks, they believed the distance had the potential to damage their networks. The importance of personal interactions in order to maintain guanxi in the Chinese culture means that absences were seen to erode their social ties, and efforts were made to maintain their organisational guanxi during an IA:

We still keep in contact due to our work tasks but it's different because I don't have the chance to talk to them face-to-face, people tend to forget you and you become less important when you are absent too long.
(male, management)

It is important to be visible even though you are away from headquarters. For example, I ring my managers for their birthdays or Chinese festivals and make sure I bring them presents every time I go back to China. (male, IT)

Assignees also acknowledged the importance of maintaining long-term guanxi and therefore will be cautious in changing organisations.

I cannot afford to change company too frequently because I will lose all the important things that I have gained over those years. For example, I will have to start my guanxi network again in the new company. (male, marketing)

Also, comments pointed to the importance of external guanxi and how it might affect the transferability of international learnings. The importance of friendship, family and other contacts outside the organisations provided a strong social tie which influenced assignees' perception of career decisions. For example,

I talked to my friends and they made me feel like going back to China. They often talk about their work and I think I could do the same thing and be close to my friends and family. (male, IT)

Similar concerns extended to personal, non-work related networks, such as friendships with university classmates which were also seen as important to one's career.

In China, the more people you know, the easier you can get things done, and the more opportunities you may get. It is the same case for careers. I need to keep connected with my friends, so if there is any good opportunity in their company, they can let me know ... You never know what might be there around the corner. (male, project management)

My contact with old friends has decreased as well, being away makes it difficult to keep in touch. I miss the old times when we would meet every week for dinner or drinks. (male, management)

One needs to invest in your friendships. If you put more effort and time into them, there will be returns. For example, friends can be very

helpful in providing opportunities for new jobs. [In my case] being far away means I lose all these opportunities. (male, IT)

The significance of personal networks are frequently discussed in the literature on self-initiated assignments (e.g., Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Thorn, 2009a), though less so in the case of company-backed IAs. The relevance of personal networks in the present study may be due to several factors. First, the specific nature of Chinese *guanxi* means that the boundaries between work and personal contacts are less distinctive (Chen & Chen, 2004). Personal contacts such as friendship have as much influence on careers as that from work-related networks. It is important to acknowledge that this is not limited to the Chinese context as some studies argue individual social capital plays an important role in career opportunities and progression (Lazarova & Taylor, 2009; Seibert et al., 2001; Zhang, Liu, Loi, Lau, & Ngo, 2010). However, some Chinese factors have specific implications. For example, group belongingness such as coming from the same city, or graduating from the same university, has relevance to generating connections. These shared contexts are sometimes perceived as important elements establishing friendships or social connections, and therefore help with opening up new avenues such as job opportunities (Lee & Ellis, 2000).

Another factor that might intensify the perceived importance of personal networks during an IA is the difficulty of developing new friendships, especially with Western people, including with those outside work. Friendships are important for personal well-being and emotional support (Tam & Bond, 2002). Being away from these important resources intensifies participants' focus on their existing personal networks in China.

The relevance of this is that the investigation of the value of knowing-whom or social capital needs to go beyond the organisational domain and adopt a broader approach to understanding individual satisfaction and well-being.

6.6 Career Capital in Experience

Previous sections analysed key themes emerging from the findings. Using the construct of career capital to analyse and understand these themes further, it became clear that there were changes in all three ways of knowing during an IA. This finding is in line with other studies in ways that career capital changes during an IA (e.g., Dickmann & Doherty, 2007; Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Jokinen, 2010; Makela & Suutari, 2007). However, this study further reveals specific changes within each component of career capital, outlining the complexity of career capital development during an international experience. In the following sections, attention is given to the three ways of knowing, and their relationships with adjustment, satisfaction and social integration. This is illustrated in Figure 6.5, which is then discussed in subsequent sections.

6.6.1 Knowing-how Career Capital

The changes in knowing-how career capital in the IA experience are mainly reflected in the process of adjustment. Existing knowing-how played an important role in the manner in which the participants adjusted to their new environment. Participants drew on the knowledge they already had and applied it to a new environment or adapted it to

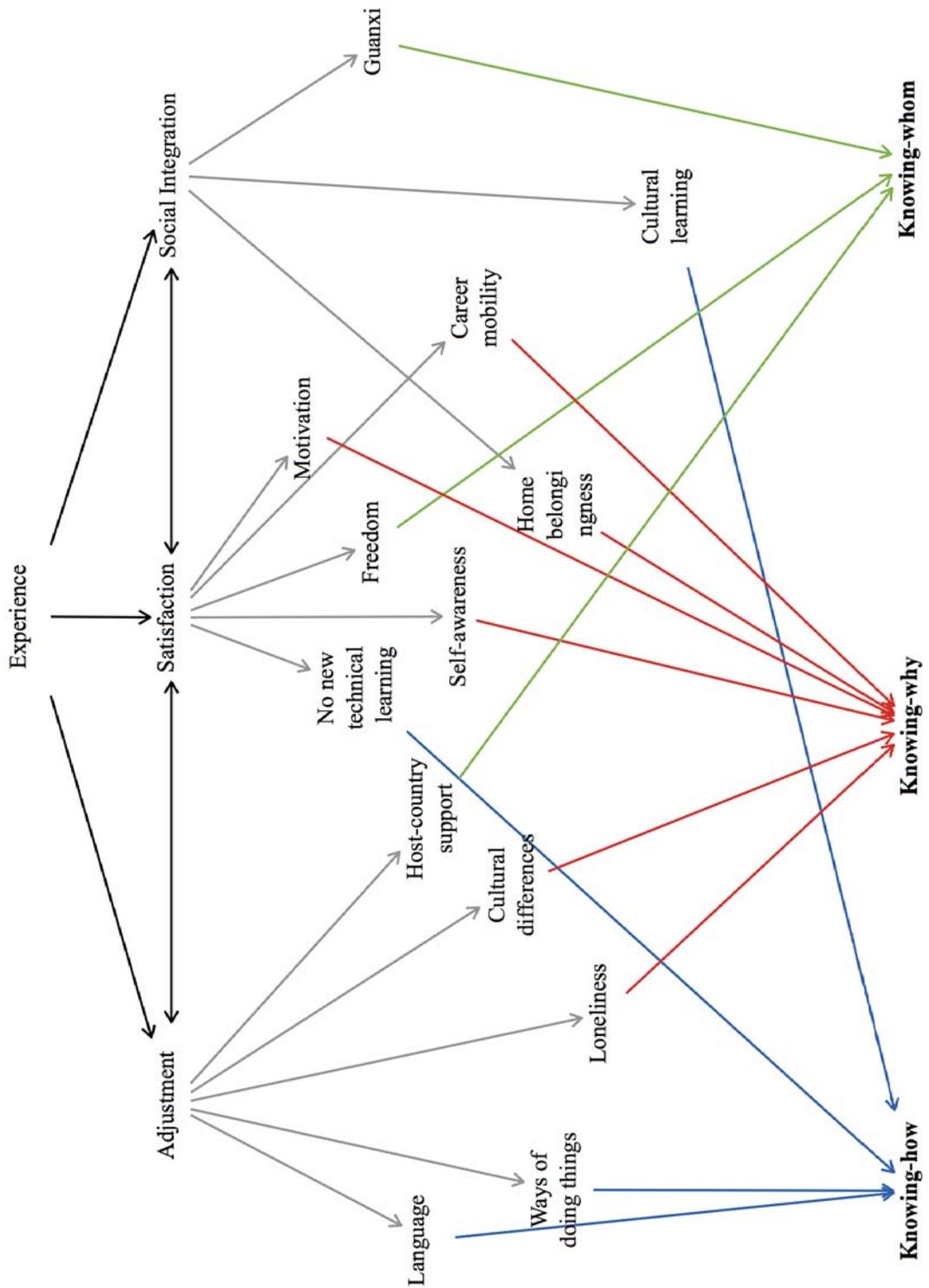


Figure 6.5. Changes in Career Capital during an IA

assist with their acculturation. In line with participants' limited initial expectations concerning knowing-how development as outlined in Chapter Five, the majority of participants anticipated limited development of new knowing during an IA. To many of them, it was simply a matter of 'same job, different location':

... Adjust to the new working environment. At the beginning, it was a bit difficult as the job context was new, I had to become familiar with my role and the company, but after a while, you soon get used to it. I would say the job tasks were what I had expected [in China]. (male, IT)

Not many new learnings, the company did not have time for you to learn from A to Z. You would just have to get on with the job. So it was a matter of adapting to the new environment. (female, management)

As the mechanism to implement organisational strategies, international assignees' job duties and scope are directed by organisational practices and policies. More specifically, in Chinese MNCs, the strategies have a strong focus on maintaining control and increasing efficacy (Edwards, 2008) and hence, international assignees are often allocated with specifically defined job tasks. This job characteristic is apparent in this study, as revealed in Chapter Five, a majority of participants were sent on IAs for technical or task-specific duties. This has implications for the IA experience, not least as organisations want to maximise international assignees' outputs with minimised costs. Developing or enhancing assignees' knowing-how, especially not immediately related to the job, may often be associated with high costs as well as considered outside strategic priorities:

You know, so many Chinese companies are 'going out' as part of Government's 'Go Global' strategies, these companies can't afford to make any mistakes in order to stay in the competition. It is a tough game, so who has the time to care about their employees' development! Well, it's OK, at least everyone [Chinese MNC] does the same thing.
(male, marketing)

This comment on organisational practices outlined the characteristics of Chinese MNCs' strategic focus which seemed to form a contrast to that of their Western counterparts. While it is becoming increasingly important for long-established MNCs to shift focus onto individual long-term career development and satisfaction to attract and retain talent for global integration (Adler & Ghadar, 1990; Baruch et al., 2009; Kramer, 2006), participants echoed a different view that Chinese MNCs tend to place more emphasis on maintaining order and effectiveness within their organisations:

I think my company's focus is on effectiveness, and this comes down to how to manage international employees like myself. It [this practice] is still far behind compared to MNCs from the USA and the UK, I think. Those MNCs care more about their employees. But this is the current status of most Chinese MNCs. We have a lot to learn. (male, management)

Such explanations conform with a conservative approach based on standardisation due to the emphasis on expanding global market share given that many of these MNCs are in their early stages of internationalisation (Alon & McIntyre, 2008). More specifically defined roles can help to minimise errors and increase potential outputs, which are also important given the political context in which these largely state-owned MNCs operate.

Another reason for this specific Chinese strategic orientation may reflect characteristics of organisational and societal cultures. Despite their rapid international expansion, organisational features such as hierarchy and bureaucracy remain evident within Chinese MNCs (Edwards, 2008; Fang, 2011). One specific characteristic of Chinese organisational culture, as noted by several participants, was that their organisations either are, or resemble SOEs:

Although X Ltd is a privately-owned multinational company, it is still very much like an SOE. There are lots of unwritten rules. You know, you have to follow them to survive. Also, these rules might not allow you to develop certain skills. (female, IT)

There are still many 'grey' areas of Chinese corporate culture in my company. It [career development within an organisation] is not a fair competition. Sometimes you need to make compromises; sometimes you need to use unconventional channels to get what you want. (male, management)

Half of the MNCs in this study are not directly state owned, but as has been noted in the literature, Chinese MNCs' internationalisation benefits from extensive governmental assistance and therefore influence, despite their ownership form (Alon & McIntyre, 2008; Cui & Jiang, 2009; Ren, 2010; Zhang, Zhou, & Ebberts, 2011). The political agenda which is infused in both organisational culture and practices reflects common characteristics shared by Chinese MNCs. In some ways, the findings here support the idea of a new (or cross) breed of MNCs as a result of state capitalism (Haley & Haley, 2013). For participants, awareness of the implicit ('like a SOE') cultural aspects of their

companies became intensified with the experience of a different cultural context during an IA.

It is quite different here [UK], although I am still with the same company, but its in the Western environment, and many aspects of the Chinese organisational culture have to give way to the local context. For example, in China, it's all about 'the culture of tobacco and alcohol'. In other words, in many cases, as long as you make sure your superiors or clients are happy at the dinner table, then everything becomes easy. (male, marketing)

There are not so many messy cultural issues I have to deal with here [Australia]. I just want to do my work properly. But in China, it is not so easy. In many cases, it is not a fair competition. Someone might not be as experienced as you are but he or she knows how to show it off and can grab supervisors' attention. (female, IT)

Under these cultural influences, individual competencies may not be the key factors for career progression, and hence international assignees consider knowing-how development as a less important experience from IAs. Instead, as discussed above, they emphasised other important areas such as maintaining good guanxi with key contacts:

Guanxi, I think, is still the most important factor for progressing in my firm. (male, marketing)

‘One crow is not any whiter than another’ [laugh]²! So the guanxi net in my firm is just as complicated as everywhere else. (male, IT)

It was also clear from the findings that the knowing-how adjustment was within the range of participants’ prior expectations, so that even though some found the initial stages of IAs challenging, it did not contribute much in the way of negative influences to their IA experiences.

While knowing-how career capital was also reflected in themes regarding satisfaction and social integration, its relevance is mainly within the adjustment process. This is a different emphasis to much of the literature which argues knowing-how development is part of international experiences (Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Jokinen, 2010). By analysing IA experience horizontally (across categories of adjustment, satisfaction and social integration) and vertically (within each way of knowing), this study suggests that knowing-how career capital development is not as straightforward as suggested (e.g., not a simple matter of increase or decrease), and emphasises the importance of understanding IA using multiple perspectives. As participants understood that the scope of their job requirement was defined in particular or narrow terms, they had lesser expectations or concerns around learning technical knowing-how and cross-cultural competency, and thereby were more reassured that job-related difficulties associated in the adjustment process would be temporary.

² This is an ancient Chinese proverb. Sometimes, it is expressed as ‘Crows under the sun are all black’ meaning bad behaviours or people are the same no matter where they are because human nature shares similarities. The participant used this metaphorical statement to show his negative and powerless attitude towards guanxi situations within the organisation.

6.6.2 Knowing-why Career Capital

Compared to knowing-how competencies, knowing-why career capital is mainly reflected in the categories of satisfaction and social integration. Satisfaction mainly concerns the individual fulfillment of desire and needs, and hence, is reflected in individual perceptions of a specific experience (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Social integration reflects participants' perceived social outcomes and how these affect individual understanding of roles and relationships (Lin, 2001). An important finding is that participants' perceived social needs have direct influence on their knowing-why career capital. By analysing knowing-why career capital across different areas of interests, the study identifies more complex changes in individual perceptions: some factors become less important while others become more relevant, and there is no singular aspects of objective or subjective satisfaction.

Also significant is the impact of cultural differences on knowing-why career capital. Although the transferability of career capital involved all three ways of knowing, findings indicate that the cultural differences predominantly affect individual knowing-why. One explanation of this is the inter-relationships between the three ways of knowing (see Sections 6.6.1 and 6.6.3). Cultural differences primarily affect individual perceptions and understandings of careers after returning to China. These influences form new knowing-why to direct assignees to perceive and utilise their knowing-how and knowing-whom in the Chinese context. The following was an example of the primary influences on knowing-how and subordinate influences of the other two ways of knowing:

I haven't tried, so I don't know how competitive I will be. But in my mind, I don't think I have any absolute advantages [knowing-how]. In fact, I think employers may want someone who has local contacts [knowing-whom]. So if that's the case, I will not make a big fuss of my international experiences on my CV [knowing-why]. I will concentrate on what I have done in China instead. (male, marketing)

In this regard, knowing-why plays an important role in making career decisions after repatriation. The perceptions of the cultural differences, the strength of cultural influences and the Chinese context determine assignees' willingness to promote their international experiences when seeking new employment opportunities. This emphasises the importance of inter-relationships between different components of career capital and how one knowing can impact the value of others.

6.6.3 Knowing-whom Career Capital

During IAs, participants considered they had gained little increase in their knowing-whom competencies. Their social and work networks were limited to local employees, clients and business partners, which they considered to be 'temporary' and not likely to have an impact on their careers. Also, because the international assignees were often accommodated together, they were not proactively involved in experiencing and learning the new culture, making it difficult to develop non-work related social capital.

They [peer workers] are important to me. Outside work, we sometimes spend lots of time together exploring the city. I don't know many people here so obviously it is good to have some friends. But I don't think it

would be easy to maintain the contacts when I finish my posting. You know, you are far away from each other so you have to get along with the new life. (male, engineering)

I don't really have the opportunity to get to know people outside work; I spend most of my time at the office and then the rest of the time with other international assignees. I don't really feel like making new friends. After all, the culture is different. (male, engineering)

As discussed earlier, to many, the *guanxi* developed from an IA was mostly functional and temporary, with little long-term personal value. In contrast, Chinese *guanxi*, such as with their colleagues, friends, and family members were seen to have significant and enduring cultural and personal value. The understanding of this extended knowing-whom career capital (e.g., including networks and contacts outside the work domain) is limited in the literature. Participants' comments were frequently drawn to the importance of personal friendships, connections with family members and Chinese society. It appears, in the Chinese cultural context, the boundaries between personal and work related knowing-whom are difficult to define (Chen & Chen, 2004). This extends the concept of career capital within a distinctive cultural setting. The definition and scope of career capital are determined by contextual factors in which the sample is embedded. It is therefore important to take these elements into consideration to develop a more flexible approach in understanding career capital development.

6.6.4 The Dynamic View of the IA Experience

While this chapter finds that major themes fit into three categories of processes including adjustment, satisfaction and social integration, it is by no means the intention to propose an isolation between categories. As shown in Figure 6.1, these three categories are inter-related in representing the continuity of the IA experience. For example, the effectiveness of IA adjustment can affect individual satisfaction and therefore influence assignees' willingness to engage in a new social environment. Similarly, an assignee who is more active in participating in a new social context may develop higher levels of satisfaction and therefore adjust to the host country more efficiently. The IA experience, like the motivations for accepting an IA (Chapter Five), is the process of balancing different factors and seeking relevance for themselves, their relationships and social identities. Most studies concerning IA experiences look at issues that are limited to only aspects of these three processes (e.g., Andreason, 2008; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Chen, 2010; Dunbar, 1992; Farh, Bartol, Shapiro, & Shin, 2010; Hemmasi et al., 2010; Shaffer et al., 1999), however this study takes an integrated and dynamic view aiming to investigate the underlying complexity of IA experience.

6.7 Summary

This chapter investigates individual IA experiences. A number of key themes emerged from the data and are summarised in categories of adjustment, satisfaction and social integration. Career capital is used as the theoretical framework to guide the data analysis in each of these processes.

Findings suggest that participants have obtained limited extension of technical skills and most of the knowing-how was related to adjustment instead of development. Findings indicate changes in knowing-why career capital. It is found that participants had realistic expectations of their IAs and experienced limited changes in career mobility. Other knowing-why factors are also analysed. This chapter also finds several key themes that are related to knowing-whom career capital. Assignees developed limited, temporary working relationships with peers at the host country subsidiaries. They developed no new social networks (outside work) due to limited engagement in local society. Assignees also expressed concern about losing existing contacts within their organisations in China. These concerns are also structured by some specific Chinese international human resource management practices such as providing IA support for shared accommodation and meals.

Having discussed the experiences and career capital, Chapter Seven examines the context of career capital development. It integrates key findings from both Chapters Five and Six to investigate contextual factors that are important for understanding motivation and experience, as well as theoretical development of career capital.

Chapter Seven

Towards a Contextual Understanding of Career Capital

I dreamed I was a butterfly, flitting around in the sky; then I awoke.
Now I wonder: Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I a
butterfly dreaming that I am a man?

-- Zhuang Tzu

7.1 Introduction

This, the third of the findings and analysis chapters, contextualises career capital in relation to the experiences and perceptions of Chinese workers posted abroad. In an attempt to move towards even broader and more complex understandings of career capital, the following research objectives are addressed here:

- To further the knowledge of career capital in an international context; and
- To investigate how the context of career capital development can be understood taking an overall view.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, it determines what are the differences between motivation and experience, contrasting key themes of the three ways of knowing. The aim is to extend the literature by analysing the complex and dynamic nature of career capital during an IA. Second, it examines why these differences exist, focusing on individual, organisational and social factors. The analysis seeks to contribute to the theory of career capital by integrating a contextual perspective. The

chapter concludes by proposing a new theoretical framework in order to further the understandings of career capital in an international context.

7.2 Overview

Chapters Five and Six explored international assignees' motivations and experiences. It was found that the role of career capital (three ways of knowing) changed during an IA. What was initially important for an international assignee (e.g., language knowing-how) might become insignificant when the IA becomes a reality. What was not expressed as an important factor at a time (e.g., family duties and responsibilities) then became more relevant later on. These differences can be connected to the contemporary debate about what constitutes IA failure and success, noted in Chapter Two. Chapter Two also noted the success and failure dichotomy that dominates the literature and the calls for more complex understandings of IA failure that extend beyond the traditional premature return (Bonache et al., 2010; Lee, 2007). These calls for more complexity have also encouraged growing awareness that the success and failure dichotomy is problematic. This chapter hence contributes to these debates by linking insight of the previous chapters concerning motivation and experience, and incorporating a contextual view of career capital in an international setting.

Regarding a potential ethnocentric bias in career research, many current studies seem firmly rooted in a universalist paradigm (Brewster & Mayerhofer, 2011), emphasising and assuming commonalities between individuals and organisations across the world and that there is one best way to manage them. Conversely, and as elaborated in this

chapter, this study argues that organisations and individuals are socially embedded in their external environment and affected by respective forces that require them to adapt their structures and behaviours to deal with their respective contexts. Context in this sense goes beyond the organisational environment (for example, organisational size or structure) and includes the cultural (national culture and values) as well as institutional (legal regulations or the respective industry) environments. This contextual view searches for an overall understanding of what is unique about China and why it is different.

7.3 Linking the Motivation, Experience and Career Capital

Key arguments so far have been established that career capital plays an important role in both motivation and experience for Chinese international assignees. This finding is in line with the majority of the literature arguing career capital development as an important issue for company-backed IAs (e.g., Altman & Baruch, 2012; Bonache et al., 2010; Doherty et al., 2011; Jokinen, 2010). However, this study's findings go further to suggest that components of career capital consisting of knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom are not equally developed throughout an IA. This can be understood by linking motivation and experience and contrasting key themes of career capital. The synergy between these themes is expressed in Table 7.1 and discussed in sections below.

Table 7.1.

Linking Career Capital, Motivation and Experience of an IA

<i>Career Capital</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Experience</i>
Knowing-how	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language knowing-how • Gaining international experience • Practicing technical knowing-how 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language knowing-how (limited improvement) • Different ways of doing things • No new technical knowing-how • Cultural learning
Knowing-why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs for adventure • Rare opportunity • Broader views (as a result of challenge) • Perceived status/reputation • Personal satisfaction • Early stage of career or personal life (being the right time) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural differences • Self-awareness • Limited changes in career mobility • The importance of family needs • The importance of maintaining a Chinese identity • Perceptions of age (being the wrong time)
Knowing-whom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational pressure to maintain good guanxi by accepting an IA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A cultural safe net: host country support • Temporary working relationships with host-country contacts • Freedom: disconnection from the home-country organisation • Difficulties in maintaining existing organisational guanxi • No new social networks • The importance of personal networks in China

7.3.1 Similarities and Differences

Language was a consistent theme from both chapters. From a participant's perspective, personal needs for improving English language skills were anticipated but only partially fulfilled during an IA. Language knowing-how, due to the nature of international experiences, is often acknowledged as relevant in the literature (e.g., Cappellen & Janssens, 2008; Jokinen, 2010; Makela & Suutari, 2007). Similar to some of these studies, findings in this research indicate that participants perceive limited usefulness of their newly developed language skills on their future career development. This is reasonably understandable for Western assignees, as some of the foreign language skills (e.g., Mandarin or German) may not have much functionality in a new context. This is, however, different for Chinese assignees, as they developed English language skills which also have much wider applications in other countries.

It was hence surprising to see this finding. One explanation is that in this study, participants developed limited and less fluent English skills, perhaps due to the shorter duration of assignment and relative isolation, but also their individual perceptions of their future careers. For example, if an assignee wants to work on another assignment, they would focus more on improving and preserving language development for future use. In contrast, if an assignee prefers to return to China, they would be less proactive in pursuing such development. In this study, most participants expressed the latter orientation. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Six, some of the host-country support provided by the subsidiaries of participants' companies placed limits around the social context of assignees and therefore their opportunities to improve English skills.

Comparing motivation and experience, this study suggests a limited scope to the development of technical knowing-how, yet participants had relatively realistic expectations from an IA. This is distinguished from the literature which suggests that international assignees develop different types of knowing-how during an IA such as job-related capacities, cross-cultural managerial skills and technical skills (e.g., Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Haslberger & Brewster, 2009; Jokinen, 2010; Makela & Suutari, 2007). From an individual level, the differences may be due to the nature (technical) and duration (relatively short) of participants' postings. From an organisational level, these differences also reflect organisational practices and structures which determine the necessities of different ways of knowing and how they may fit in the organisational context.

There were notable differences in knowing-why career capital when comparing motivation with experience. While themes relating to adventure and challenge have dominated participants' accounts of their decisions to accept an IA, the significance of these factors decreased during the assignment. It was clear that these personal expectations were temporary and became obsolete when the IA became reality. This contrast could be used to partially explain the success and failure dichotomy. When the relevance of initial expectations decreased, participants began to re-evaluate the value of international experience: if there are no other significant fulfilling aspects, participants are more likely to develop negative impressions of the IA, and in some situations, they may return early (Lee, 2007). Furthermore, personal satisfaction as a result of perceived improvements in status and reputation was an important knowing-why for accepting an

IA. This adds further information to the literature in which IA motivations are dominated by topics concerning individual satisfaction, cultural learning and boundaryless careers (Andreason, 2008; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Haslberger & Brewster, 2009; Kohonen, 2008).

In contrast, for the participants in this study, the role of social integration, notably family and cultural needs, became more relevant during an IA. A number of key social factors are outlined as important to Chinese on IAs, including cultural differences, family needs and identity. The shift of focus from self to significant others (Andersen, Chen, & Miranda, 2002) suggests that, for this sample, knowing-how factors may not be fixed and individual evaluations of priorities may change over time. Another explanation for this shift could be that, in this study, some of the motivational factors may be based on unrealistic judgments of the situation, due to lack of information about an IA. As discussed in Chapter Five, many of the Chinese participants in this study had no prior IA experience or pre-assignment training. The limited information participants had regarding an IA might contribute to the fact that there were significant gaps between what they expected initially and what the reality was later on. The findings are useful in understanding some of the factors contributing to IA failure and the importance of providing necessary organisational assistance so assignees are able to develop attainable expectations (Starr, 2009).

Another change in knowing-why is the emergence of factors associated with Chinese culture as reflected in themes of experience. This is partially due to the fact that

participants develop personal experience of cultural differences which they had no knowledge of prior to the assignment. Hence, they were able to compare and evaluate cultures of both home and host countries. Cultural differences are often discussed in the IA literature as one of the key factors contributing to IA adjustment difficulties (e.g., Li & Scullion, 2010; Okpara & Kabongo, 2011; Selmer, et al. 2000; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). Findings from this study further suggest that cultural differences are not only related to adjustment processes but also to participants' willingness to integrate into a new society. Despite their positive evaluations of the host country cultural environment, participants had a strong tendency to maintain their cultural identity. This might be due to the connections with significant others such as their parents in China as well as a lack of full immersion in the host country. The implication is the importance of acknowledging relevant cultural issues that matter to international assignees and therefore providing corresponding support during their IAs.

Another change in knowing-how that became evident from an analysis of Chinese participants' narratives is that during an IA, perceptions of age and their social roles related to age change. The new social environment caused participants to re-evaluate their age and their priorities. As discussed in Chapter Five, Chinese MNCs purposely select younger employees for IAs aiming to eliminate family issues. However, this study suggests some of the unanticipated personal and family needs such as being close to parents emerged during an IA. Hence, research on IA and careers needs to consider the role of culture in influencing individual assessment of needs, including the perception of age which varies across different contexts.

There were also significant changes in knowing-whom career capital. A notable feature was that the participants' focus of connection was in China. Some comments pointed to participants' definitions of 'who am I'. According to social embeddedness theory (Oyserman & Markus, 1993), self-identity is created by multiple layers of influences including family, friends, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, as well as historical, economic and national-regional factors. These components create a dynamic and interactive self. Participants frequently referred to themselves as 'son, daughter, friend, colleague, and Chinese' reflecting their sense-making of their connections with others:

It [Australia] is good, but it is not my home ... [before I came to Australia], I thought I would enjoy settling in a foreign country, but now, I want to go back to China. It is not bad to be a Chinese. (male, management)

You will always feel like a foreigner, no matter how long you live here [the USA]. There is something powerful pulling me back to China. My family, my friends and everything I know is there. (female, IT)

Hence, it seemed to be important for participants to maintain their social ties in China than to invest in developing ties in their host country. More than 80 per cent of participants related that careers are not individually owned and many factors are involved when making a decision. Almost all interviewees (28 out of 31) expressed the importance of others (knowing-whom) on their careers:

From my personal point of view, I haven't planned to stay abroad too long. I want to go back to China to develop my future so it means the longer I stay, the more difficult it would be for me to get back on track. You see, you need contacts for everything [in China], but after staying on an IA for two years, I would lose all my Chinese contacts including business partners and friends. I will have to start from zero. (male, management)

7.3.2 Connecting Career Capital with Motivation and Experience

As discussions in the previous section suggested, there were overlaps of career capital between motivation and experience, however there were significant differences as well. These differences raise a possibility for new themes in complementing current knowledge of the three ways of knowing. Specifically, two new themes emerged from the findings: 'knowing-when' and 'knowing-where', and these are discussed in the following sections. The connections between motivation, experience and career capital, and possible new constructs are expressed diagrammatically as in Figure 7.1. The dotted line arrows acknowledge that individual perceptions are inevitably retrospective. Individuals may select some criteria rather than others for evaluation according to certain needs for meaning (Weick, 1995). Thus, the needs for purpose, justification, personal efficacy and self-worth may influence the criteria participants use to evaluate IAs. For that reason, a dotted line indicates that the connections are not fixed. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it is important not to assume or conclude an absolute range of possible constructs, and others may emerge from future research.

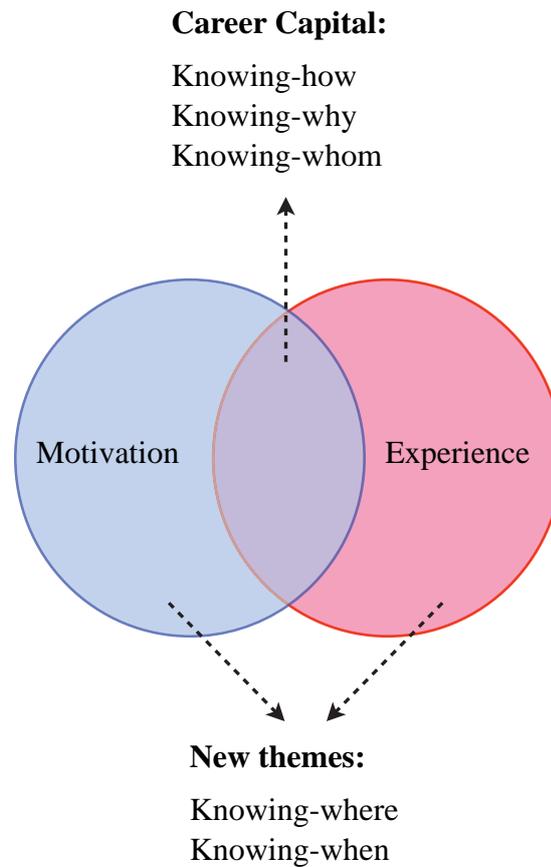


Figure 7.1. Connecting Motivation, Experience with Career Capital

Knowing-when

Knowing-when refers to the pacing and timing of roles, activities and choices regarding career development (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). The term was first introduced as one of the essential career competencies which interact to predict success in protean and boundaryless careers. However, only three of these (why, whom and how) have so far been examined to any extent in the careers literature, and it is so far unclear precisely how these competencies relate to the ‘meta-competencies’, core survival skills, or career/life management skills proposed by other researchers. Another limitation is that

most understanding of career capital is developed within the Western context where social structures, organisational practices and individual career patterns have much in common. This may restrict the emergence of new themes which may be essential for very distinctive cultural groups (e.g., West versus East). This study suggests the need to revitalise the concept of knowing-when. Comments such as ‘being the right time’ and ‘it is an earlier stage of my career development’ are examples of this theme.

The current understanding of knowing-when is limited to a focus on one’s working context, including individual competencies to take opportunities and make appropriate career movements within or across organisations (Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Lamb & Sutherland, 2010). This current study of Chinese international assignees expands the notion of knowing-when to incorporate social factors in the career domain. More specifically, in this study, knowing-when was found to be related to a perception of ‘being at the right time’, including individual perceptions of age, and their organisational, family and social roles related to age. These understandings play an important role in participants’ evaluation of international experience during an IA and their future focus of career development. For example,

I am not ready yet. I want to experience a bit more before I decide what to do next. Obviously, if I get married or have a child, the situation would be different. (male, marketing)

If I want to change to another organisation, I think the younger the better, because you would have fewer responsibilities. Like me, my

main focus at the moment is on my family, so I need to be careful with any career moves. (male, engineering)

In this broader sense of career, knowing-when is not limited to the actual time but also one's perception of timing based on an individual's assessment of important factors for the career. Thus, this study presents a more advanced understanding of this element, as revealed by Chinese participants. For example, as discussed in Chapter Six, some participants' judgements on their age and related duties and responsibilities changed during an IA. Being-away from China played an important role in influencing one's perceived age (e.g., 'I am getting old'[male, IT, 27 years old]).

Findings from this study of Chinese international assignees suggest that constructs of career capital should not be limited to the organisational domain but should include relevant social factors, previously not discussed in published research. This is particularly the case for international assignees whose careers are developed across national and cultural boundaries. This de-emphasises the notion that individuals have freedom to make independent career decisions (De Vos & Soens, 2008; Segers, et al., 2010), and suggests that careers may be bounded by essential family and social factors (Sommerlund & Boutaiba, 2007).

Knowing-where

This study contributes to the development of knowing-where by outlining several key themes, some related to the cross-boundary nature of IAs and cultural differences

between home and host countries, while others relate to individual definitions of organisational and social positions:

I think I have gained some skills that I didn't expect before [an IA]. It is because of this international experience ... you know, when you are in a different country, your understanding of who you are is different. My view is broader now. (male, IT)

The whole international experience has changed my understanding of who I am. Before, my [career] view was very limited: point-to-point life between work and home. But being here, I realise other important factors: my family, my friends, ... and yes, I want to be in China. (male, marketing)

More generally, knowing-where refers to 'the geographic, spatial or cultural (national or regional) boundaries for entrance, training, advancement within a career system' (Jones & DeFillippi, 1996, p. 95). Similar to knowing-when, knowing-where has received limited attention to date. While the original definition of knowing-where acknowledges the importance of organisational, national and global contexts for career development, its meaning and value for individual career satisfaction is unclear.

The earlier quotes illustrate that, for the participants in this study, knowing-where is not just about the physical location (such as organisational or social environment), but also an individual's perceptions of 'where I *should* belong to' (e.g., a perceptual space). For example, in this study, participants revealed the importance of knowing-where by emphasising the desire of going back to China and being close to family, friends and

organisational key *guanxi*. It is the competencies of understanding one's position and finding the appropriate roles within organisational and social contexts that contribute to individual career development and progression. Further, these knowing-where themes are also related to knowing-why career capital confirming the interrelationships between different ways of knowing (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Assignees who have knowing-where competencies manage the process of career development in a self-directed way towards an increased level of career maturity (knowing-why), and will differentiate themselves from those who rely on the organisation to drive this process of career progression (Lamb & Sutherland, 2010). The finding emphasises the importance of self-determination to achieve career goals.

While both knowing-when and knowing-where surfaced from a specific sample of Chinese assignees, the findings have potentially much wider implications in the area of IA research. To take one example, further research could examine how far an individual should strive towards broadening their portfolios of career capital (not just a single way of knowing), moving in the direction of personal goals and vision. While an individual is primarily motivated and driven by personal needs and satisfaction (knowing-why) to accept an IA, this research suggests that it gradually shifts to external locus of control such as that from the organisation and social needs (knowing-when and knowing-where). Similarly, knowing-whom and knowing-how career capital may decrease in value for an international assignee whereas the significance of knowing-where and knowing-when capital to an individual increases. Hence, successful career capitalists need to consider the overall development of various knowings. Understanding the value

of each knowing and differentiating them between ‘nice-to-have’ and ‘must-have’ according to the appropriation of a situation are essential for achieving personal goals.

7.4 A New Model of the Contextual Factors Influencing Career Capital

It is well established that the development of career capital is contextual (Harris, et al. 2003; Jokinen, 2010). Career theories suggest that careers are affected by contextual factors which can be separated into several levels including individual, organisational and social dimensions (Briscoe et al. 2012). However, while the contextual impacts on careers are acknowledged in the literature (Mayrhofer et al., 2007), most empirical studies tend to focus on one or some of the dimensions such as organisational factors (e.g., Dickmann et al., 2008; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009), or individual differences (e.g., Kim & Slocum, 2008; Shaffer, Harrison, Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006). Furthermore, there is limited knowledge of cultural influences on career capital development and, even more significantly, limited investigation of the overall effects of contextual factors (Briscoe et al. 2012). In response to these gaps, this study proposes a multi-dimensional model incorporating context, career, motivation and experience. This model is shown in Figure 7.2. The framework, devised from the findings, demonstrates that career development during an IA is a *complex* and *interdependent* process with influences from various domains. It attempts to capture the dynamism of the process and to acknowledge the individual experience. Indeed, the first (and central) domain in the model to emerge from this study of Chinese assignees, is the individual context. The importance of ‘self’ in one’s career has gained increasing attention in recent years and

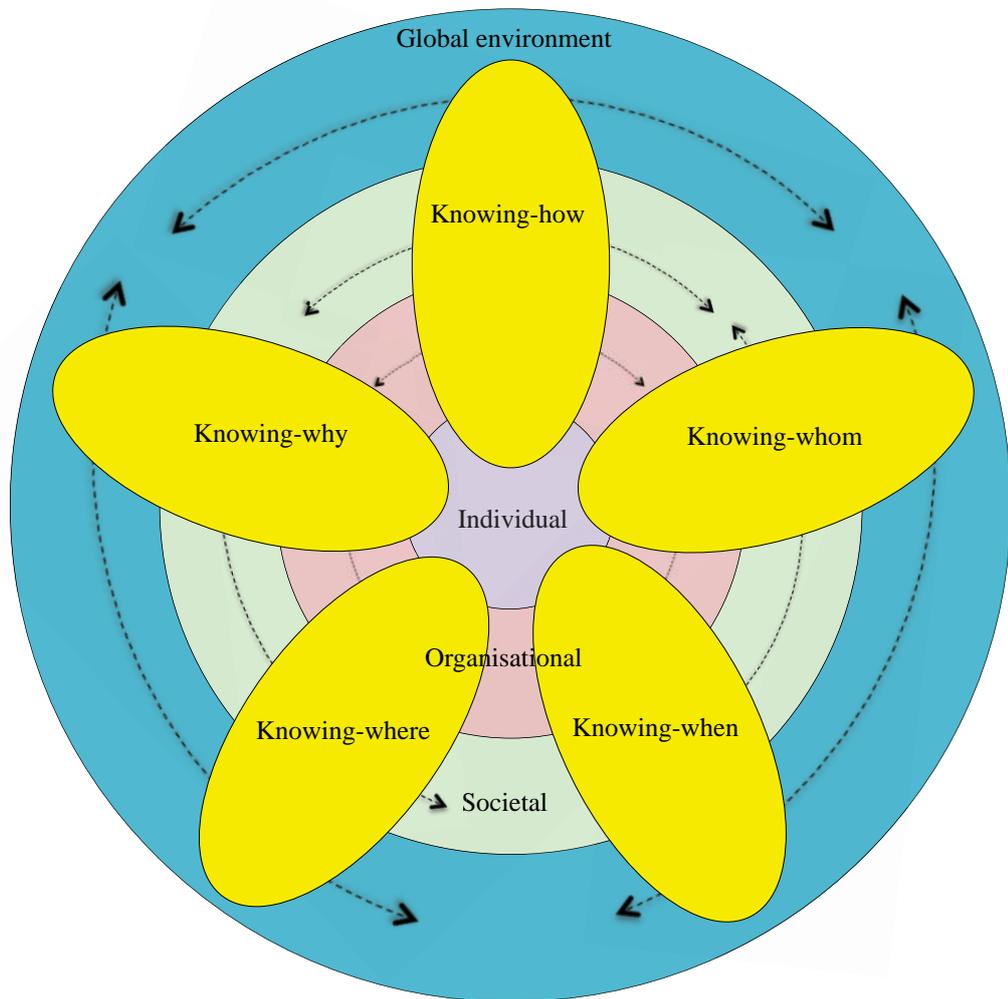


Figure 7.2. Contextual Factors Influencing Career Capital

studies argue that individuals have more freedom to make independent career decisions (De Vos & Soens, 2008). Career concepts such as the boundaryless (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994) and the protean careers (Hall & Moss, 1998) are regularly used to investigate individual influences on career development. Judge, Higgin, Thoresen and Barrick (1999) find personal traits are strongly related to career success while other researchers focus on career development according to personal needs at different stages

of life (Savickas, 1997). This study acknowledges this notion of self-fulfillment, however further argues that the importance of self is influenced by the relationships one has with others. For example, some participants acknowledged that the IA decision was made with limited thought about the negative impact it may have on their parents. It is important to note that these impacts on others were highly related to one's judgment of individual roles and what benefits and conflicts may result from making a specific IA decision.

The second domain evident in this framework for contextual influences on career capital is the organisational level. Career capital development is influenced by organisational factors related to structure, strategies, practices and processes (Dowling et al., 2009). The Chinese organisational context has been shown to present different international human resource management strategies and practices influenced by its specific social and political environment. Some factors, such as clearly defined IA tasks and the importance of hierarchy and *guanxi*, are specific characteristics of Chinese MNCs. International assignees' career development is consequently affected by these organisational factors. For example, key characteristics of Chinese organisational culture - 'unwritten rules' and 'personal impression' (Chen, 2001) - have direct associations with knowing-whom career capital. Therefore, participants have given more emphasis to the importance of knowing-whom and what needs to be done in order to ensure a good personal resource within the organisation. Similar to the interrelationships between the individual and social context, these organisational factors are also mediated by the social and cultural elements of China.

The third domain represented in the proposed model of contextual influences is the social context of either home or host country. At the social level, careers unfold within the cultural context shaped by economic, institutional and historical influences. Because of the cross-cultural nature of IAs, Chinese international assignees may face many challenges during IAs. These challenges continue to affect assignees when the assignment terminates and they return to the home country. This reverse cultural shock can result in a re-evaluation of the international experience and its impact on careers (Bossard & Peterson, 2005). Furthermore, Chinese assignees may have similar experiences to those identified in the Western literature, such as job issues after repatriation (Feldman, 1991). It is therefore important to evaluate what the perceived value of career capital is in the wider social context such as how practical the international experience is to a potential new employer. As revealed by participants, they perceived little practical value of the career capital development from an IA once they return to the Chinese context, as Chinese employers tend to pay more attention to workers' local skills and knowledge as well as their local connections in terms of advancement.

The wider social level, is a more encompassing domain in the framework to emerge from this study and both individuals and their organisations are social constructs. At the social level, career is seen to have a value with individuals using the career capital gained from IAs to achieve social outcomes such as reputation, status, increased employability and wealth (Lin, 2001). Participants invariably referred to the impact of the IA on their social identities and the need to be accepted by members within the

cultural context. In the case of Chinese international assignees, when an individual makes a career decision, they are not only driven by their own desires but must also conform to familial and societal expectations (Mau, 2000) and hence make dependent decisions based on the collective cultural norms. Also, the results indicate that the value of international experiences depends on the transferability of newly developed career capital across social contexts and the social meanings of the five ways of knowing. This suggests that individual evaluations of career development are also socially defined.

Findings from this study also indicate the need for the framework of contextual influences on career to include the further dimension of the global environment, acknowledging the cross-national boundary-crossing nature of an IA. Global careers are becoming an important topic in the literature as individuals put more attention on developing global competencies and career capital that can be utilised in different countries (Baruch et al., 2009; Cappellen & Janssens, 2005; Makela & Suutari, 2009). MNCs are also becoming more aware of the importance of utilising assignees' global skills to achieve an organisation's international strategies (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008). Though this is less relevant at the present time for Chinese assignees, it is a factor that could emerge as increasingly important in the near future, as well as being of wider relevance to MNCs generally.

A key feature of the proposed model is that these contextual dimensions are interdependent, forming an overall effect on individual career development. Simply focusing on a single dimension such as individual satisfaction or neglecting the

interdependencies between different contexts may result in limited understanding of the dynamics of career. The findings from this research qualify the notion of protean career in terms of whether and how far individuals own their careers (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; De Vos & Soens, 2008; Hall & Moss, 1998; Qin & Baruch, 2010). While an individual may have more freedom to make career decisions, their career choices are strongly shaped by the context they are in and their perceptions of the outcomes of career decisions. These contextual factors are particularly significant for individuals such as international assignees who move across different contexts including individual, organisational and social domains. For them, the challenge is not only to develop essential career capital to enable effective job performance during an IA, but also to find the appropriate context for long-term career capital development.

Another significant finding from the current study is the dominant and mediating role of the social context on both individual and organisational domains. Individuals are guided by their cultural values to make what are perceived to be appropriate career decisions. Numerous studies compare career behaviours and find significant differences between countries (e.g., Hamori & Koyuncu, 2011; Stahl & Cerdin, 2004) and cultural characteristics are represented in forms of practices and processes within an organisation. As argued by Aumann and Ostroff (2006, p. 14), 'organisations embedded in the same societal cultural context are likely to develop organisational cultures that share certain cultural attributes derived from that culture'. Consequently, national cultural norms shape the organisational context in which international assignees develop their careers. Equally, for Chinese assignees, the development of career capital is

heavily influenced by the desires and responsibilities associated with their social roles. For Chinese organisations, the practices and policies for utilising individual learning from IAs are influenced by Chinese social and political agenda. For example, as shown in this study, the collectivistic, social nature of China emphasises the importance of *guanxi* within the organisational environment and influences organisational practices towards a bureaucratic, hierarchical culture. The specific political features of Chinese society add further complexity to the organisational context, since most Chinese MNCs are either owned by the Government or influenced by its political agenda. Party membership and personal *guanxi* with governmental officials still play an important role in influencing the access to certain opportunities such as an IA and progressing within an organisation. In some circumstances, these political influences may overtake the importance of career capital such as knowing-how and knowing-why.

Hence, Chinese MNCs are finely sculpted social and political products (Fang, 2011), and there is a strong interdependency between the organisations and the social context they are in. This operates at the subjective as well as structural level, since national culture affects the way in which people think, make decisions and ultimately, the way in which they perceive, feel and act (Schein, 1990a). It thus shapes personal and professional goals, the performance of tasks and the administering of resources to achieve them (Lok & Crawford, 2004). For example, Confucian values, which are often associated with obedience, respect of authority and loyalty, are evident in Chinese organisations and have an influence on individual expectations and behaviours around career development. Using Chinese assignees as the sample, this study confirms the

importance of understanding specific cultural factors in terms of career objectives and actions.

7.5 Perceived Value of Career Capital Development

Having established the importance of context for career capital development, findings also provide insights as to the value of career capital Chinese assignees gain from an IA. This study proposes that career capital does develop from an IA, but it is more important to ensure these developments can fit into the future career context. In order to gain return from these career capital ‘investments’, assignees need to minimise the loss of career capital through the process of value creation and transfer. For example, a Chinese assignee may be motivated to develop more China-related knowing-how if they consider their future is in China. If an assignee is considering moving to another company, they might have to put more emphasis on ensuring the acquired career capital is transferrable to a new organisational context. The value of career capital varies to different parties and in different contexts (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003). While one person may value the skills learned, another may not, and similarly, what is valued by one organisation may not be valued by another.

The assumption of the perceived value of career capital can be usefully explained in terms of the framework of symbolic capital (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). More specifically, in relation to individual careers, symbolic capital reflects both internal and external recognition of one’s skills, knowledge and experiences. For example, participants may develop career capital such as skills and networks which will increase

their visibility, helping them accumulate symbolic capital such as status and power within an organisation (Iellatchitch et al., 2003). Symbolic capital can be also institutionalised, shared and valued within organisations. The creation of value depends on the degree of usefulness that is appreciated by different parties within organisations (Fuller & Tian, 2006). For example, promotion and increases in salary are organisational recognition of the value of individual symbolic capital. Symbolic capital can then be converted collectively to other forms of capital, such as human and social capital, and ultimately, economic capital, to achieve organisational objectives (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009).

Symbolic capital is a social construct (Gergs, 2003) and thus is also deeply connected to culture. Its value is reflected through the process in which other forms of capital become accepted and socially recognised, based on a shared value and understanding of their usefulness. Symbolic capital is therefore reflected in the cultural values that are shared collectively by societies. Power and reputation are both significant symbolic capital and are only valid in a social context if they are recognised and accepted by others. The process of recognition assumes a shared understanding by other actors of what constitutes value and, therefore, what is considered legitimate, valid and useful (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). Symbolic capital is the social currency of other forms of capital and as Everett (2002) suggests,

the other forms of capital are converted to symbolic capital the instant they are deemed legitimate and it is only in the form of symbolic capital

that the ultimate base of power wealth can exert power and exert it durably. (p. 6)

Findings from this study, specifically those related to the contextual value of career capital, fit the theoretical construct of symbolic capital. In this view, the value of international experiences depends on 'being known and recognised' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 37). For example, if career capital is likened to a nation's currency, symbolic capital would be the economic value of the currency. The currency is only valid (e.g., having its usefulness to purchase products) if its economic value is recognised collectively or if the currency is valid in the specific country. The currency is simply a piece of paper if it is not perceived as valuable in the context. Similarly, the newly acquired three ways of knowing become valid in the context when career capital is recognised as useful by different parties. This supports the emphasis on the social and cultural, not merely individual, in this research. It is necessary to acknowledge that it is not the intention of this study to universally identify or explore contextual factors. For example, both political and economic factors, two significant features of China (Bjorkman, Smale, Sumelius, Suutari, & Lu, 2008; Cooke, 2008; Keister & Zhang, 2009; McNally, 2008; Yang & Stoltenberg, 2008) are not explicitly explored in this study¹. However, because contextual factors are integrated (see the previous section), political considerations are

¹ While both factors are considered as highly relevant in influencing organisational practices and individual behaviours, participants' comments did not directly point to these areas. One explanation could be that the uniqueness of Chinese political influences which generate high interest in the West, is a common phenomenon to Chinese who work and live in the specific Chinese political environment. Hence, they did not consider governmental influences as a specific factor. Second, Chinese are reluctant to criticise the Government in public although there has been increasing public demand for freedom of speech and democracy in recent years.

implicit in other factors such as social characteristics. For example, family responsibilities are not only a social issue, but are entrenched in politics. It is legislated by the Government that adult children have both moral and legal duties for looking after their elderly parents and this is reinforced by the one-child policy. Hence, social needs (that strongly influence career perceptions) are a reflection of a political agenda promoted by the Government.

7.6 Summary

This chapter links key themes presented in both Chapters Five and Six. It also goes further to examine the applicability of career capital in an international context. This chapter re-evaluates the theoretical development of career capital based on empirical evidence from this study. First, the chapter makes comparisons between motivation and experience in terms of three ways of knowing, and confirms the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of career capital theory. The findings also suggest that there are possible new (or at the least, neglected) themes which may further the understanding of career capital theory in distinctive cultural settings. Knowing-when and knowing-where are discussed incorporating the importance of boundaryless (e.g., across national contexts) and protean (e.g., self-perceptions of important elements in one's career life) careers.

A key element of the chapter is the proposal for a new theoretical framework that incorporates individual, organisational and social contextual domains. At a theoretical level, the model is closely connected to a complex and dynamic range of meanings, social relationships and interactions and themes relating to social structures. The

importance of both individual and collective action is evident. A common theme of the IA management literature at present is that those who are sent onto IAs are often 'HRM Ping Pong Balls' (Inkson et al., 1997, p.357) with little power or initiative of their own. Findings from this study suggest that career development is, in fact, an active process where individuals are active players who draw on a series of factors including their own interpretations of the IA experience and what it means to them. Although the central role played by family, mainly spouses and children, is widely acknowledged in the literature (Andreason, 2008; Konopaske & Werner, 2005; Lee, 2007), this chapter suggests that Chinese assignees face different challenges from those faced by their Western counterparts due to their particular demographic characteristics and an idiosyncratic understanding of their social identity and roles. The proposed model of contextual influences demonstrates the interrelated and dynamic nature of contextual factors and emphasises the need to take an overall perspective to understand the complexity of international experience.

Finally, the importance of understanding the symbolic value of career capital is evident in this chapter, and the discussions helps to move the focus away from skills development to skills transferability. Findings from this study of Chinese assignees highlight the importance of understanding the contextual value of career capital in order to achieve individual goals. Evidence presented here supports calls for more complexity by highlighting the possible redundancy of the failure/success dichotomy that has permeated much of the literature.

This discussion chapter has therefore highlighted the most important empirical and theoretical contributions of the research. In the next final and concluding chapter, key findings are summarised, practical and academic implications are discussed, limitations of research are explained, and future research directions are proposed.

Chapter Eight

Conclusions

Knowing others is wisdom, knowing yourself is enlightenment.

-- Lao Tzu

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter draws together the research question, the specific research objectives, and the findings in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. It presents the theoretical contribution and practical implications of the study, the limitations of the investigation, and suggestions for future research. The chapter starts with an overview and then each of the research questions and objectives is addressed.

8.2 Overview of the Study

This exploratory, qualitative study aims to deepen and extend the understanding of IA experience, contribute new data regarding the motivations for accepting an IA and develop career theory. Early on it was established that the literature on Chinese international assignees is limited empirically, has seldom focused on career issues and does not include multiple perspectives or dimensions of investigation. This research addresses this gap. It is an inductive and qualitative study which analyses the motives, experiences and career capital of thirty-one Chinese international assignees who provided a narrative account of their international experiences. The lens of career

capital (Inkson & Arthur, 2001) provides a useful basis on which build an understanding of IAs and career issues for Chinese workers posted abroad. Concepts derived from recent literature on context form the backdrop to interpreting what the assignees makes of their life and career (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). Specifically, this study confirms the value of multi-dimensional perspectives of context to investigate key factors that are relevant to IA.

8.3 Research Questions

At the heart of this research is the question: *'how is an IA perceived by Chinese international assignees?'* More specifically, this study aims to: 1) examine the effectiveness of IAs from an individual perspective, utilising the theoretical construct of career capital and drawing on the international human resource management literature relating to the management of IAs; and 2) contribute to IA theories by the analysis of data from and interpretations of careers, focusing specifically on the motivation to accept an IA, how IA is experienced and how that experience impacts on career development respectively.

8.3.1 Contributing Empirical Data

This research establishes that much of the existing IA scholarship focuses on international assignees sent by Western MNCs to other countries and locations. By providing empirical data on Chinese international assignees as a relatively under-researched group, this research advances knowledge and starts to fill the existing gap.

This study also addresses the paucity of research into the career experiences of Chinese international assignees by providing empirical data about changes of individual career capital during an IA. Adopting a qualitative methodology provides the means to acquire ‘thick and rich’ description and to capture the meanings and experiences of participants (Denzin, 1989, p. 210). This research focuses specifically on the motives, the experience of IA and the context of career capital development during an IA. Sections 8.3.2 to 8.3.4 summarise the findings according to each of the specific research objectives.

8.3.2 Motivations

The first three research objectives centre on decision-making of IA. They are as follows:

- To understand how the IA opportunity is perceived by international assignees;
- To understand the key motivations for accepting an IA; and
- To explore how career capital (the three ways of knowing) influences individual motivations.

Chapter Five reports a constellation of drivers in the decision for accepting an IA, with some more dominant than others. Adventure and challenge are dominant drivers while others such as job requirement, right time and financial benefits have more neutral functions in the process. It is argued that IA decision-making is an evaluation of the balance between various factors. While some factors such as knowing-how development and financial incentives are commonly acknowledged in IA literature

(Doherty et al., 2011; Hippler, 2009; Pinto et al., 2012), others such as personal challenge, the desire to see the world, and the assignment being at the right time are often considered as key factors in self-initiated IA literature (Jokinen et al., 2008; Richardson & Mallon, 2005; Tharenou, 2009; Thorn, 2009b) and are seldom explored in company-backed IA studies. The findings suggest the importance of personal satisfaction even for IAs that are arranged by MNCs. Career development for Chinese assignees however, may not be as important as may be assumed because many understand the difficulties of employment upon repatriation and therefore focus on personal returns that they can utilise in the long term.

It is evident that the motives are interdependent, with participants regularly drawing on one to explain others. Using the construct of career capital, the study finds knowing-why is the ultimate individual expectation from an IA. While both knowing-how and knowing-whom are considered as relevant in decision-making, they both contribute to the participants' perceived organisational or social status and reputation that are associated with international opportunities. It is clear that while objective satisfaction is important, subjective fulfillment plays a more dominant role in one's understanding of career success. These findings echo some studies of international careers (Fish & Wood, 1996; Pinto et al., 2012; Stahl et al., 2002) suggesting that international assignees perceive the importance of career factors when initially making an IA decision.

8.3.3 Experience

The findings from this study of Chinese international assignees in MNCs suggest that IA is a multi-dimensional and dynamic experience, and that dimensions are inextricably linked. These findings related to the second category of research objectives concerning individual experiences of an IA:

- To determine the most salient themes in participants' experiences of an IA;
- To identify how participants perceive the positive and negative aspects of an IA;
and
- To understand how participants interpret various dimensions of career capital during an IA.

Notably, participants regularly used one dimension or theme to explain or substantiate another. Three dominant dimensions, including adjustment, satisfaction and social integration, are particularly relevant to Chinese international assignees' accounts. Participants obtained limited technical skills during an IA and most of the knowing-how was related to adjustment instead of development. The findings indicate changes in knowing-why career capital. Participants had realistic expectations of the IA and experienced limited changes in career mobility. Other knowing-why factors are also analysed. For example, family responsibility and social identity play a significant role in determining their willingness to stay in a foreign country. Several key themes are related to knowing-whom career capital. Chinese assignees developed limited, temporary working relationships with peers at the host country subsidiaries. They developed no

new social networks (outside work) due to benign engagement with the local community. Assignees also expressed concerns about losing existing contacts within their organisations in China. They explained the specific characteristics of Chinese *guanxi* and how it may affect career progression. Unlike other IA studies which explore part(s) of these dimensions (such as adjustment) of international experience (e.g., Dunbar, 1992; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998; Shay & Baack, 2004), this study emphasises the continuity of individual experiences and explained the interrelationships between key factors. For example, a successful adjustment during an IA may contribute to better satisfaction. Similarly, an assignee who is less active in engaging in a new social environment may find the international experience less satisfactory.

Another key finding is the complex changes of career capital during an IA. It is suggested that career capital does not simply increase or decrease during an IA. While assignees develop some (limited) knowing-whom from the host-country subsidiaries, they are often concerned about the loss of potential key *guanxi* back in China. Other social networks such as connections with family members and friends are also considered to be important for career opportunities and individual well-being. Some themes are new compared to the existing literature. For example, family needs and responsibilities play an important role in affecting assignees' perceptions of their connections with China and future career directions. English language skills are highly valued by participants but their practical value for one's career (particularly for those who plan to pursue long-term career goals in China) is limited. While these findings may be culturally sensitive (as suggested in Chapter Seven), they may have wider

applicability in other national contexts. In particular, family oriented collectivism is considered a common cultural root in most Asian countries (Hofstede, 2001; Pun et al., 2000).

8.3.4 The Context of Career Capital

Chinese international assignees use multiple criteria to evaluate their IA experience, and this supports calls for integrated, multi-dimensional approaches of international career research. The specific research objectives relating to this finding are:

- To further the knowledge of career capital in an international context; and
- To investigate how the context of career capital development can be understood taking an overall view.

The study finds that participants' perceptions of IAs are determined by various factors which are constantly changing depending on individual and contextual circumstances. Importantly, findings tend to confirm that perception as to the value of experiences is a process of sense-making (Weick, 1995). In other words, the individual perceptions of an IA are not an absolute representation of 'good' or 'bad' but a series of judgements around how the experience fits into one's specific situation.

The importance of individual factors permeates all accounts. Participants were actively engaged in the experience of IAs and satisfaction, age and perceived reputation are important personal factors to interpret the IA opportunity. It is also suggested that

individual factors such as significant others influenced participants' understanding of self and therefore their perceptions of the value of the IA.

Organisational context appears as another dominant theme in terms of career capital development. While it is increasingly acknowledged that international careers are becoming more protean or boundaryless (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Kohonen, 2008; Stahl et al., 2002), this study suggests that, at least for Chinese international assignees, the role of an organisation cannot be ignored. This is especially important in relation to the utilisation of career capital. Organisational culture, international human resource management practices, implications of international assignees' experience, length of IAs and organisational structure are all found to be relevant in affecting individual career capital development among Chinese assignees. While some organisational factors such as organisational support and international human resource management practices are acknowledged by some Western researchers (Dickmann & Doherty, 2007; Dickmann & Harris, 2005), other factors are more particular to Chinese organisations. Notably, it is found bureaucratic hierarchy and guanxi-based careers are apparent in Chinese MNCs.

Chinese nationals' interpretations of their social roles, belongingness and connections with others influence their perceptions of the value of career capital that is developed from an IA. These findings echo some studies around symbolic capital (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009; Fuller & Tian, 2006; Gergs, 2003), which suggest that career capital is a social construct and its value is affected by how it is perceived by others in society.

The utility of this concept is explored and the discussion concludes with a focus on the dynamic and interdependent nature of contextual factors.

8.4 Theoretical Contribution

Specifically, this study makes identifiable and unique contributions to the theoretical development of the fields of career capital and IAs, in particular the need to develop a dynamic, contextual and multi-dimensional framework for understanding IAs. The next sections briefly discuss the significance of these dimensions before elaborating the theoretical model outlined in Chapter Seven.

8.4.1 Career Capital

This study extends applicability of career capital from an essentially Western context to the Chinese context. It confirms that all three ways of knowing, knowing-how, knowing-why and knowing-whom, are important for Chinese international assignees. This element of the study is of note as career capital theory was developed and is mainly used in the Western context. Yet, the centre of the world economy is continually moving from developed countries to developing countries and especially, to emerging economies in the current century. There is also a trend that foreign direct investment outflow to the West is growing at a rapid pace emphasising the important role of China in the world economy.

Crucially, this study extends the current knowledge of career capital by outlining the significance to Chinese assignees of another two ways of knowing: knowing-when and knowing-where. These two ways of knowing have been acknowledged by a limited number of studies (Jones & DeFillippi, 1996; Lamb & Sutherland, 2010), their meaning, and more importantly, but their roles in international assignees' career development remain unknown. This study contributes to this gap as participants' interpretations of them are revealed. Although the findings, such as perception of age, cultural identity and home belongingness, are from a sample of Chinese assignees, their implications are not limited to this specific cultural group. For example, findings may be useful to investigate international assignees' experiences from MNCs of other emerging economies (such as South East Asian Countries), as many of these Eastern countries share similar cultural norms.

Furthermore, the career capital of Chinese assignees reveals a more complex experience of career capital development during an IA. Some parts of knowing may be important at one point of time but may lose their significance at another. Second, this study examines the central question often asked in the literature on whether an IA is good for one's career (Benson & Pattie, 2008). Studies using career capital theory mainly focus on the development of career capital (e.g., Jokinen, 2010; Jokinen et al., 2008; Li & Scullion, 2010), however, little is known about the perceived value of the development. This study moves one step further and focuses on the perceived contextual value of the international experience. It provides more specific details to this rather broad conceptual understanding of career capital.

The study adds further evidence to organisational careers. The useful, nevertheless partly one-sided, reception of the boundaryless career concept (Arthur et al., 2005; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) has partially discouraged analyses of organisational careers. The findings here support a renewed focus on the role of organisations in this globalised era, not least that organisations have a significant effect over individual perceptions of career success and satisfaction. While this study acknowledges the role of individual inputs in one's career development (Inkson, 2006; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009), findings also highlight the importance of understanding organisational and social influences. Both the individual and the contextual perspectives provide useful material, but they need to be combined, for careers depend on the interaction of individual agency and the constraining or enabling aspects of the social context. In practice, both protean and boundaryless concepts are ideal types (King et al., 2005) and structural hindrances that circumscribe a person's career development and decisions. More specifically, even though the younger generation of Chinese workers have fewer 'objective' constraints than their older counterparts, the culturally and subjectively perceived expectations (as well as different operating structures of Chinese MNCs) exert a powerful force in terms of guanxi and family ties, and shape their perceptions of career opportunities (e.g., the desired context of developing their career capital). This contextual view of career capital is in line with recent academic development (e.g., Inkson, et al., 2012, Rodrigues & Guest, 2010) which critiques the narrowly defined boundaryless career, and provides empirical support (of Chinese assignees) for broader and alternative interpretations of modern careers.

8.4.2 Dynamic Context

While studies have tend to focus on either the individual or organisational context of career development, this study seeks to make a unique contribution by investigating the overall contextual effect, incorporating individual, organisational and social factors. Acknowledging the cross-cultural nature of an IA, this study reveals key social elements such as guanxi-based Chinese culture that have key organisational and social implications, encouraging or preventing assignees developing and utilising their career capital. This study also provides a dynamic view on the context of careers in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of key issues that arise from an IA, and which may be useful in conducting comparative studies across cultural contexts.

8.4.3 An Integrated, Multi-dimensional Approach

Key to the theoretical contribution is the integration of motivation, experience and career capital. This study focuses on the important aspects of the literature and analyses the relevance of decision-making to an IA experience. The study shows how some of the key factors for accepting an IA become insignificant during an IA and suggests an individual change of perceptions and judgments on the relevance of factors over time. While it is important to recognise the key factors for accepting an IA, it is more important to understand their impact on individual experiences and career development.

8.4.4 A Theoretical Model

A significant contribution of this study that emerged from the research is the proposition of a theoretical model (Figure 7.2). While it was not the initial intention for this qualitative and exploratory study to offer a theoretical model, the analysis of the interrelationships of key themes generated a coherent framework within which to explain its findings. The model is underpinned by the assumptions of context and dynamism. Thus, the extent to which motivations and experiences are connected to career capital is influenced by the context in which they are located. The model aims towards a theoretically grounded understanding of individual experiences of IA. Yet, drawing on Geertz (1973), it is important to acknowledge that other themes may be introduced that did not emerge in this study and that further research may suggest other theoretical themes that need to be included. It may also be that different kinds of IAs (e.g., short-term versus long-term IAs) have different kinds of experiences, or the influences of family may be more or less for different international assignees.

8.5 Methodological Implications

This thesis contributes to knowledge not only from an empirical and theoretical, but also from a methodological point of view by providing a guideline for IA research in a non-Western context, China in particular. The study is underpinned by the phenomenological paradigm which believes reality is socially constructed and is produced and reproduced by people acting on their interpretations and their experience of it. The specific means identifying social constructions employed in this thesis was

through semi-structured interviews, a method which has previously been neglected in research on Chinese. This enabled a close examination of individual perceptions of international experiences. Research on IA has tended to use quantitative research methods involving survey designs (Collings et al., 2009; Werner, 2002) so the use of interviews results in a vivid picture from the individual participants' point of view and thus greater in-depth insight into the inside world of individual research participants.

The methodological contribution is not simply its qualitative nature or individual focus but the acknowledgement of specific social or cultural norms when conducting the research. While snowball sampling has been criticised as having potentially low representativeness (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), this study considers the utilisation of such an approach as a critical and necessary feature. This thesis specifically argues that career is a socially constructed concept and can only be examined and understood within a wider social and cultural context. In particular, *guanxi* is a specific Chinese cultural feature that plays an important role in social communication and career development (Luo, 1997). Instead of moving away from this essential cultural feature, this study chooses to recognise its role in the process of recruiting participants and conducting research. This study is in line with Cooke's (2009) work which stresses the uniqueness and importance of *guanxi*, and the fact that in Chinese research, trust is a crucial element of gaining honest and direct information. Furthermore, the use of participants' own language when conducting interviews and analysing data is an example of the acknowledgment of the importance of culture in research. These

techniques have general implications for conducting research that is culturally sensitive or in which participants are difficult to recruit.

In terms of text analysis, this study specifically examines the linkages between individual perceptions and interpretations of an IA and careers utilising CAQDAS NVivo 9. While the advantages of such an approach for managing complex data are widely recognised (Kvale, 2007), its application in other means has received little attention so far. In this study, NVivo 9 is used as an integrated tool for reviewing literature, storing data, documenting research progress and recording critical reflections such as annotations and memos. The advantage is not only the efficiency of data management, but also its flexibility in comparing findings with existing literature and linking important supplementary information. With the fast development of information technology, it is now possible to manage the qualitative research processes efficiently, effectively and creatively. The methodological implication here is particularly relevant for studies that involve multiple media or methods.

8.6 Practical Implications

Primarily, the findings from this study have significant implications for Chinese MNCs and human resource practitioners. The thesis examines how individuals perceive the IA opportunity, experiences and career impact. It argues that understanding individual needs are important in effective IA management. Financial incentives are often considered as the key motive by Chinese MNCs. The findings in this study, however offer the differing perspective that objective satisfaction may have a limited influence

on individual motivation beyond the immediate decision which itself is informed by more subtle considerations around individual obligation and organisational control. Acknowledging individual needs that are associated with family, social identity and future career development may be a useful approach in managing international assignees successfully. Another finding here is that assignees' international experience may not be fully utilised effectively, at least from assignees' perceptions. Hence, in the rapidly changing global context, Chinese MNCs might pay closer considerations to how they deploy assignees and develop their learning in order to better pursue organisational strategic objectives.

There are also considerations relevant to Western management and organisations. While MNCs use career benefits (such as the development of career capital from IAs) to attract and motivate employees to accept IAs, MNCs often have limited support to facilitate the transfer of new skills and knowledge (Crowne, 2009). This study suggests MNCs need to provide adequate practices such as policies on career support so the value of career capital (or symbolic capital) will be appreciated by individuals, organisations, and wider society (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). Furthermore, some Chinese organisational practices such as the use of short-term assignments and offering shared-accommodation or living arrangements may offer new alternatives to improve the effectiveness of adjustment and personal satisfaction.

8.7 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Due to its exploratory nature, the study is limited by several factors. The sample was relatively small and not selected to be representative, but instead to provide rich data and insight to develop deeper understanding of IA experiences. As acknowledged in other studies (e.g., Cooke, 2009; Fang, 2011; Williamson & Zeng, 2009; Zheng & Lamond, 2009), it is difficult to conduct research in Chinese MNCs and it proved to be a challenging task to firstly identify and then form trust with participants to obtain information on sensitive issues such as their future career directions, perceptions of organisational practices and evaluation of international experiences. While the use of both face-to-face and telephone interviews with a small size sample may limit the applicability of findings, as one of the first of its kind, this study moves towards a better understanding of Chinese international assignees. As noted in other studies with similar sample sizes (e.g., Altman & Baruch, 2012; Dickmann & Harris, 2005; Mohr & Klein, 2004), a combined approach of face-to-face and telephone interviews is an effective approach to open up avenues for learning new knowledge.

The limited demographical characteristics such as industry, age, IA experience, occupation of the sample may also restrict the applicability of findings. While it was attempted to recruit and interview a wider range of participants, in making initial contacts, the homogeneous characteristics (such as relatively young age with no spouse) were clearly evident among Chinese assignees. Hence, from another perspective, this study offers valuable information on rationales behind such similarities among assignees (for example, Sections 5.5.2 and 6.5.2 provide a discussion on age). The

technical nature of participants' jobs in this study may also limit the implications of findings. Although cross-sample comparisons between participants who have managerial roles with those with more defined, technical positions found no significant difference in career perceptions, the sample is too small to make anything of such a conclusion. Future studies can therefore take this further to investigate the significance of variables such as cross-industry differences, IA experience, and gender differences.

Limitations also relate to single researcher bias. All interviews, transcriptions and coding was done solely by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees to pick and choose which themes are more salient to them. Yet, it also requires caution on behalf of the interviewer, in managing the interview process. Though my own experience as an overseas Chinese, who has knowledge of both China and the West, was useful in having some knowledge of the subject area, the extent to which this may have affected the research interview process is unknown. Efforts were however made to increase the reliability wherever possible. And in technical terms, an integrated platform of NVivo was used and a professional translator was consulted to ensure the accuracy of translation.

Last, the changes and development of environmental, economic, social and other conditions in China are continuing, and further reforms are still occurring. The temporal aspect of this study only gives insights into the situation at one point in time in the context of Chinese MNCs. For future study on Chinese MNCs and IAs, the theoretical model developed from this study needs to be adjusted to fit the prevailing situation at

that particular point in time. The study is limited to Chinese MNCs and whether findings can be applied to other contexts needs to be tested. Further work on transnational companies from emerging economies is important in gaining fuller understanding of theories and developing global or universal frameworks.

This study has built up a foundation by developing a conceptual framework for career capital. However, any study is constrained and bounded and future research, implicit in the stated limitations of this research, offer additional avenues for future research.

For example, further research might explore the experiences of nationalities other than Chinese assignees. A comparative study of different nationalities of international assignees would add to the existing work on differences between cultures and organisational practices. Specially, it would be useful to conduct research on assignees from other emerging economies as this is very limited in the literature. Small-scale qualitative studies are useful for exploratory research in new areas and this study therefore, serves as an initiative for further research incorporating larger sample sizes, encompassing other demographic dimensions. Further along the research track, it might also be worthwhile combining the insight of the qualitative research with quantitative testing of hypotheses and propositions to move towards a more generalisable conception of the IA experience.

This study offers a multi-dimensional contextual model, yet, its applicability across cultures needs to be verified. Future qualitative studies could be useful in investigating the interactions between context and dimensions. More in-depth analysis can be also

useful in understanding each of the relevant factors. For example, how do cultural elements influence organisational IA practices and individual career experiences? One area of research that would be of interest, and especially so as this thesis emphasises the importance of the transferable value of career capital, is how career capital from an IA can be used in different organisational and social contexts. Future investigations could focus on the utilisation of IA experiences within and by organisations.

Finally, as suggested in Chapter Two, there is an increasing demand for examining more diverse forms of IAs such as frequent flyers, commuter IAs, global virtual teams and global self-initiated corporate assignees. Future studies can compare individual experience differences between these forms using the proposed multi-dimensional model.

8.8 Reflections of the Researcher

During the research process, it became apparent that regardless of the extensive research investment made in understanding IAs and career issues that are associated with international experience, organisations and human resource practitioners have not always ensured sufficient support for international assignees. This state of affairs is disheartening. The lack of organisational attention to the individual career development of international assignees is a disconnect from the research and IA management practices one would expect from a MNC. The stories of international assignees from the current study reveal difficulties and personal concerns of developing one's career during an IA.

Interpretation of their narratives indicated essential factors that matter to assignees and their relationships with others. Particularly, participants' comments on their cultural and social identity offer some answers to my long-standing personal question about who am I as a Chinese living overseas. The Chinese identity is an important element that is embedded in my cultural roots. Family connections and social responsibilities serve as the benchmark for defining one's roles and relationships with others. Participants' emphasis on home belongingness echo the flashback of memories I experience every time I return to China. It is the sense of being home, a sense of re-connecting with others that matter to oneself. There is something special that connects overseas Chinese, such as the participants in this study and myself, with China which leads to decisions that not only benefit the self but also others.

The assignees in the study have all told amazing stories of challenge, adventure, learning, and resilience, stories filled with expectation, happiness and disappointment. They continue to inspire me both personally and professionally.

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Appendix A - Statement of Contribution Containing Publications

DRC 16



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION TO DOCTORAL THESIS CONTAINING PUBLICATIONS

(To appear at the end of each thesis chapter/section/appendix submitted as an article/paper or collected as an appendix at the end of the thesis)

We, the candidate and the candidate's Principal Supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the candidate's contribution as indicated below in the *Statement of Originality*.

Name of Candidate: Christian Yao

Name/Title of Principal Supervisor: Prof James Arrowsmith

Name of Published Research Output and full reference:

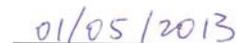
Yao, C. (Forthcoming, 2013). The impact of cultural dimensions on Chinese expatriates' career capital. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*.

In which Chapter is the Published Work: Chapter 5, 6, 7

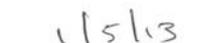
Please indicate either:

- The percentage of the Published Work that was contributed by the candidate: 100% (the sole author) and / or
- Describe the contribution that the candidate has made to the Published Work:


Candidate's Signature


Date


Principal Supervisor's signature


Date

DRC 16



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOOL

**STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION
TO DOCTORAL THESIS CONTAINING PUBLICATIONS**

(To appear at the end of each thesis chapter/section/appendix submitted as an article/paper or collected as an appendix at the end of the thesis)

We, the candidate and the candidate's Principal Supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the candidate's contribution as indicated below in the *Statement of Originality*.

Name of Candidate: Christian Yao

Name/Title of Principal Supervisor: Prof James Arrowsmith

Name of Published Research Output and full reference:

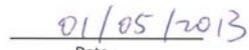
Yao, C. (Forthcoming, 2013). The perceived value of Chinese expatriates' career capital: A symbolic capital perspective. *Journal of Global Mobility*.

In which Chapter is the Published Work: Chapter 5, 6, 7

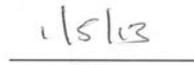
Please indicate either:

- The percentage of the Published Work that was contributed by the candidate: 100% (the sole author) and / or
- Describe the contribution that the candidate has made to the Published Work:


Candidate's Signature


Date


Principal Supervisor's signature


Date

GRS Version 3-16 September 2011

Note: The above two publications have been accepted and currently in production. Final articles are not yet available and therefore not attached.

Appendix B - A List of Chinese Papers from Major Research Publications

- An, L. (2002). Expatriate management of transnational corporations. *Chinese Journal of Management Science*. Vol 14, 121–124.
- Bai, Q. (2010). Cost-effective expatriate management: Some thoughts for our MNCs during the financial crisis. *National Business Review*. Vol 68, 47–52.
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- Li, Q. F., & Liu, Z. F. (2010). A study on repatriates' issues. *The Science of Science and the Science and Technology Management*. Vol 256 (4), 14–18.

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- Qi, A. (2007). A three step approach of managing expatriates. *National Business Review*. Vol 36, 124–126.
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- Wang, C. Y. (2011). Cross-cultural management of multinational corporations. *National Business Review*. Vol 74, 54–58.
- Wang, L. (2001). How to adapt to a new context successfully? *Chinese Journal of Management*. No. 18201, 10–14.
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- Wang, J. P. (2011). From “Band of Brothers” to “enemy”-expatriate management practices within Chinese MNCs groups. *The Science of Science and the Science and Technology Management*. Vol 278 (08), 46–48.
- Wang, Z. H. (2006). A study on Chinese MNCs' IHRM strategies and talent management. *Chinese Journal of Management*. Vol 76, 78–84.
- Wen, Q. L. (2007). Key factors for effective expatriate management. *Management World Magazine*. Vol 56, 76–78.
- Wen, Q. (2005). Local support for our expatriates: The needs in a different culture. *Chinese Journal of Management*. Vol 65, 102–108.
- Wu, Q. Y. (2006). Repatriation management: What can be done better? *Chinese Journal of Management*. Vol 78, 23–28.
- Xin, Q. (2004). The selection of overseas personnel in transnational enterprises. *Management World Magazine*. Vol 23, 34–36.

- Yang, M. X. (2008). Critical issues to MNCs' knowledge exchange: The importance of expatriates' career development. *East China Economic Management*. Vol 32, 46–51.
- Yang, Q. (2005). An analysis of Chinese MNCs' growth: From an HRM perspective. *Chinese Journal of Management*. Vol 64, 12–18.
- Yao, R. Q. (2008). Expatriates' compensation management systems. *Chinese Journal of Management*. Vol 92, 56–58.
- Yin, H. L. (2010). Expatriates' performance evaluation. *Reform of Economic System*. Vol 22, 76–80.
- Zhou, H. Y., & Li, J. P. (2002). Research on Chinese MNCs' transnational operation and expatriates management. *Reform of Economic System*. Vol. 9, 3–8.
- Zhou, H. Y. (2011). Research on the Chinese MNCs' expatriate adjustment and performance. *Modernization of Management*. Vol 2, 37–42.
- Zhu, F. (2011). Evaluation of Grey Correlation Model on expatriate selection: The empirical evidence. *Forum on Science and Technology in China*. No. 17004, 23–28.

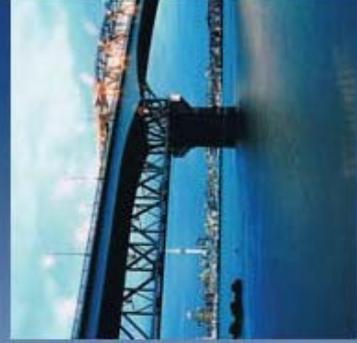
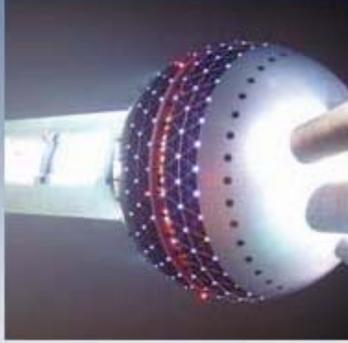
Note: These articles are in Mandarin and were accessed between 2011 and 2012.

Appendix C - Interview Invitation



Massey University

新西兰国立梅西大学



您是否感受过工作的挑战和压力？
您是否奔波于国际职场之上？
您是否考虑过未来的发展方向？
您是否思考过什么是升职的决定因素？

请加入我的科研项目，让姚迪分享您的职场体验。

您的付出：40-60分钟非正式的谈话。

您的回报：对职场方向更深刻地了解；我根据您的学术经验给您提供的发展建议；以及一份完整的学术报告。

您的权益：您的任何信息绝对的保密（本研究通过梅西大学研究委员会审核提供保证）。

您的个人信息不会出现在任何发表文件中。您有权拒绝回答不想回答的问题。

参加本课程或有任何疑问，请与我电邮联系 c.d.yao@massey.ac.nz。在此衷心地感谢您对本课题的协助，期待聆听您的人生历程。祝您工作顺利，前途似锦。

(English Translation)



 **Massey University**
新西蘭立梅西大學

Are you working in a Chinese multinational company?
Do you have international working experience?
Have you experienced the challenges and pressure from work?
Have you considered what the determinants of career success are?

I sincerely invite you to join my Ph.D research project, let me share your career stories.

What is it: A 40-60 minute relaxing, informal conversation.
What you will get: A deeper understanding on the direction of your career and a full academic report on international career success.
Your rights: Your personal information will not appear in any published document. You have the right to refuse to answer any particular questions or stop answering the interview at any time.

To participate in this project or if you have any questions, please contact me by email: c.dee.yao@massey.ac.nz or visit my blog: <http://1095973511.qqzone.qq.com>

Thank you again for your interest and collaboration for this project and I look forward to listening to your career journey. I wish you all the success for your future.

Appendix D - Information Sheet



MASSEY UNIVERSITY

The Impact of International Assignments on Chinese International Assignees' Career Development

INFORMATION SHEET

About the Researcher

Christian Yao is a current PhD student at Massey University located in Auckland, New Zealand. He also completed both his undergraduate and post-graduate studies at Massey University. The researcher received both primary and secondary education in northeast of China prior to coming to NZ in 2001 so he has a good understanding of both Chinese and Western cultural contexts. The researcher is fluent in both Mandarin and English and has a passion for contemporary Chinese issues.

About the Research

This interview is conducted as part of a PhD project. It investigates the impact of international assignments on Chinese international assignees' career development and provides a systematic analysis of factors that motivate Chinese international assignees to accept international task.

An Invitation

I would like to invite you to participate in this study by agreeing to an interview on your perceived impact of international assignments on career development. Please be

assured that your participation is completely voluntary and all information collected will be used for this research only.

Project Procedures

The project will involve 45-60 minutes semi-structured interview. During this time, you will be asked about the impact of your international assignment. The interview date, time and location will be arranged in advance at your convenience.

Data Management and Confidentiality

The interview will be voice recorded (with your permission). All data will be kept in secure place and only the researcher will have access to it. All information collected from the interview will be used for this project only and will not be available to any other parties.

Your Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- stop answering the interview at any time;
- ask for the sound recorder to be turned off at any time;
- refuse to answer any particular questions;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;
- access the full report findings when completed, through the Massey University Library.

Contact Details

Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about the project.

The researcher
Christian Yao
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Massey University
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Supervisor
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Massey University
Tel: +0064-9-4140800 ext 9580
Email: k.thorn@massey.ac.nz

Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application **10/077**. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Ralph Bathurst, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800 x 9570, Email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.

Note: This project is funded by Massey University and Asia: NZ Foundation.



MASSEY UNIVERSITY

海外派遣工作对中国员工的职场生涯的影响

调查信息简介

关于研究员

Christian Yao 是一名就读于新西兰奥克兰的梅西大学（Massey Univeristy）的博士生。他在梅西大学完成了他的本科及研究生课程。在 2001 年抵达新西兰之前，他在中国的哈尔滨接受了初级及中级的教育。Christian 可以说流利的普通话及英语，并对中国以及西方文化有良好的了解。另外，他对中国的实事现状有很大的兴趣。

关于研究项目

此采访用于完成梅西大学的博士研究报告。它的目的是探讨关于“海外派遣工作对中国员工的职场生涯的影响”。它将提供了关于影响海外华人的职场发展的因素的系统分析。

邀请函

如果有这个机会对您进行简短的采访，这将是我的莫大荣幸。您的参与是完全自愿的，并且所有收集的资料仅用于本研究之用。

调研程序

该项目将涉及 45 至 60 分钟面对面的采访。研究人员将按照预先安排的问题，关于您对海外派遣工作的影响进行提问。研究人员将提前预约于您方便的面试日期，时间和地点。

数据管理和保密

访谈将在您批准的前提下语音记录。所有资料都将被保存在安全的地方，只有研究人员可以取得。从采访中收集的所有信息将只用于此项目，并不会以任何名义提供给第三方。

您的权利

您没有任何的责任必须接收这个邀请。假如您决定参与，您拥有以下的权利：

- 在任何时候终止回答问卷；
- 要求停止录音；
- 拒绝回答任何你不想回答的问题；
- 分享研究发现总结；
- 阅读将在梅西大学图书馆提供的完整的研究报告。

联系我们

非常感谢您抽出宝贵的时间来考虑我们的邀请。假如有任何关于本研究项目的问题，欢迎您联系我们。

研究员

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道德委员会准本研究项目已经通过梅西大学人类道德委员会的批准（Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application **10/077**。如果您对本研究项目在操作上有任何顾虑，请联系Dr Ralph Bathurst, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800 x 9570, Email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.)

注释：此研究项目由梅西大学(Massey University)和亚洲新西兰基金会(Asia: NZ Foundation)提供基金赞助。

Appendix E - Participant Consent Form



MASSEY UNIVERSITY

Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

School of Management
Private Bag 102904, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland 0745 T +64 9 441 8115 F +64 9 441 8109 <http://management.massey.ac.nz>

The impact of international assignments on Chinese international assignees' career development

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

Full Name - printed



MASSEY UNIVERSITY

Te Kunenga
ki Pūrehuroa

School of Management
Private Bag 102904, North Shore Mail Centre, Auckland 0745 T +64 9 441 8115 F +64 9 441 8109 <http://management.massey.ac.nz>

海外派遣工作对中国员工的 职场生涯的影响

参与同意书

我已阅读信息表，并给以提供了关于本研究的详细解释。我提出的问题已经得意满意的回答，并且我明白我可以在任何时候提出希望了解的更多问题。

我同意/不同意面试内容被录制。

我希望/不希望我的面试录音退还给我。

我希望/不希望有面试内容的数据正式存档。

我同意在信息表中列出的条件下参与这项研究研究。

签名:

日期:

.....

姓名:

.....

Appendix F - Sample Interview Protocol

Part 1: Demographic questions (Personal information: e.g., marital status, age and etc):

Please tell me a little bit about the company that you are currently working for and your job position.

Can you please tell me about yourself? Is your family here with you? Do you have any previous international experiences?

Part 2: Motives for Accepting an International Assignment

What are the primary motives for you accepting an international assignment?

What are the most important things that you expect to gain from this international assignment?

Do your family members support your relocation decision?

In your opinion, what factors are the most difficult in the process of making relocation decision?

In your opinion, what factors are most difficult when working in the foreign country?

Motives, Questions on following themes developed from the literature:

Financial benefits (income, salary, compensation) (Tung, 1998, Dickmann, Doherty, Mills, & Brewster, 2008; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002)

Job security (Dunbar, 1992)

Improved career mobility (Mendenhall, Kuhlmann, Stahl, & Osland, 2002)

Global mindsets (improving skills) (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006)

New challenges (personal development) (Suutari & Brewster, 2000)

Interesting experience (Bossard & Peterson, 2005)

Family issues (Sparrow, Brewster, & Harris, 2004)

Part 3: Perceived Impact on Knowing-why Capital

Do you think that experiences from an international assignment have an impact on the direction of your future career development?

What's your future career direction after the international assignment?

Definition of career success?

Value, self-identity (strength, weakness)

Part 4: Perceived Impact on Knowing-how Capital

In your opinion, what are the principle areas of development? What are the main skills that you have developed/ would like to be developed from an international assignment?

Do you think that experiences from the international assignments will have a:

Positive impact on your job-related skills?

Negative impact on your job-related skills?

What are the most difficult skills to be learned in a foreign country?

Technical skills-job and organisational (transferable?)

Managerial skills

Any other skills?

How do these skills influence your future career (perceived influences), both within and outside your current organisation?

Cultural related skills (adaptivity, cultural sensitivity, language skills)

Part 5: Perceived Impact on Knowing-whom Capital

How does the international assignment affect your existing social networks in China, both organisational and social?

How does the international assignment affect the development of new network in China, both organisational and social?

Have you developed new networks in the foreign country? If so, how did you develop them? And who are you mainly associated with? Are they organisational networks (job-related) or social (personal) networks?

How significant are these contacts in relation to your career development (future career opportunities, progression within the organisation)

Part 6: (New) Knowing?

Learning new ways of thinking,

Cultural ability

Skills in dealing with people from different background

‘Western’ thinking

Part 7: Factors that Affecting Career Development

What are most important things that you have learnt from the international assignment?

And how does that contribute to your career development?

How do new skills that you have learned contribute to your career development?

Will they be significant for your job in the current organisation?

Will they be significant for your future jobs?

How do the experiences change your views of your career development?

What are your career aspirations when you return to China?

Are you expecting a higher position with your current organisation?

Are your planning to change to another company within the next 2 years? What kind of companies are you looking for?

How competitive do you consider yourself in the job market (Chinese and foreign markets)? Compared to your previous competitiveness before the international assignment?

How do your networks affect your career development?

How important do you think networks are for your career development? What you expected to get from the investment of social network?

How do these network help you getting a better job: 1)within the current organisation?
and 2) with a new employer?

How do you maintain your existing networks while you are in the foreign country?

How do you plan to maintain your networks that are developed in foreign country when
you return to China?

Do you think it is different to develop networks in a foreign country compared to that in
China?

What do you think about the cultural differences between China and the foreign
country? And how do these differences affect your career development?

Do you expect a change in terms of cultural awareness?

Have you developed language skills? How do these skills affect your existing job and
future career development?

Do you think that the international experience will help you to find a better job in
China? Or in the foreign country?

Part 8: Perception of Organisational International Assignment Practices

Does your company have clear policies/practices regarding the international
assignment?

What are the most important factors that helped you to gain the international assignment
opportunities?

What support your company provide when you are in the foreign country?

What support your company provide for your family members when you are in the foreign country?

Are you satisfied with these practices?

Note: these questions only provided some guidelines on general categories of interview themes. Actual questions were adjusted based on the flow of individual interviews.

Appendix G - Human Ethics Approval Letter



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
ALBANY

25 November 2010

Christian Dee Yao
c/- Professor J Arrowsmith
College of Business
Massey University
Albany

Dear Christian

HUMAN ETHICS APPROVAL APPLICATION – MUHECN 10/077
“The impact of international assignments on Chinese expatriates’ career capital”

Thank you for your application. It has been fully considered, and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, a reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R Bathurst'.

Dr Ralph Bathurst
Chair
Human Ethics Committee: Northern

cc: Professor J Arrowsmith
College of Business

