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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  
Massey University, Albany,  
New Zealand.

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**2013**

## **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.

**The study was carried out with the support of a Doctoral Scholarship from Massey University, a Postgraduate Scholarship from Human Resources Institute of New Zealand and a Research Award from Asia New Zealand Foundation.**

## **Acknowledgements**

It would not have been possible to complete this thesis without the guidance, support and help of many kind people around me. I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation for all those who have encouraged and supported me throughout my doctoral study at Massey University.

I am most deeply indebted to my two supervisors, Professor James Arrowsmith, and Dr. Kaye Thorn who supported me through every stage of my PhD. I am grateful for the engaging conversations and professional guidance that Professor Arrowsmith has afforded me while challenging my ideas, interpretations and conclusions to produce meaningful academic work. Thank you Jim for your patience, motivation, enthusiasm, and immense knowledge.

I thank Dr. Thorn whose nurturing nature and sharp mind kept me going through this journey. Thank you Kaye for believing in me and stimulating in me the sense that academic community would be a great place in which to spend the rest of my professional life. Your inspiration, guidance, trust and friendship are so precious that I will cherish them forever.

Completing a PhD can be a very lonely exercise. I am therefore very thankful for the wealth of support I received both from the great group of people I met at School of Management as well as my fellow PhD students and friends.

Furthermore, my sincere thanks go to all the participants in the study for their openness in sharing their valuable experiences and stories, which made the completion of this study possible and above all, meaningful. My gratitude also goes to Massey University, Asia NZ Foundation and Human Resources Institute of New Zealand for their interests in this research topic and financial support provided.

Finally, my greatest gratitude goes to my parents for their unconditional love. Mum and Dad, I owe you my utmost thankfulness and respect for unselfishly providing me with every possibility to pursue this stimulating path, encouraging me in all my endeavours and understandingly accepting every decision I have taken. 爸爸妈妈，我爱你们。I also want to thank my family and friends in New Zealand, China and elsewhere for their love and support. Last but certainly not least, to my partner John - your support, patience, faith and constant love have sustained me. I would not be today's me without you.

In memory of my grandfather and his comrades

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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.

Yao, C. (2013). The perceived value of Chinese expatriates' career capital: A symbolic capital perspective. *Journal of Global Mobility: The Home of Expatriate Management Research*. 1(2), 187-218.

### **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.

### **Professional Presentations and Participation**

Yao, C. (2012). The perceived impact of international assignments on Chinese expatriates' career capital. Presented at 26th Annual Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference 2012, Perth, Australia. December 5-7 [Conference Proceeding - Oral Presentation, Research].

Yao, C. (2011). West meets East: The impact of international assignments on Chinese expatriates in Aotearoa/New Zealand and beyond. Presented at Human Resources Institute of New Zealand Postgraduate Forum, Auckland, NZ. September 8 [Conference Contribution - Oral Presentation, Research].

*Note:* Statement of Contribution is attached (Appendix A)