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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
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at
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New Zealand.

Christian Dee Yao
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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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In memory of my grandfather and his comrades
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................ iv
List of Figures ..................................................................................................................................... x
List of Tables ...................................................................................................................................... xi
List of Related Publications ......................................................................................................... xii

Chapter One ..................................................................................................................................... 1

Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Background of the Study ............................................................................................................ 1
  1.2 Research Objective and Question .............................................................................................. 4
  1.3 The Theoretical Context of the Problem ..................................................................................... 5
  1.4 The Research Approach ........................................................................................................... 7
  1.5 The Significance of the Study .................................................................................................... 8
  1.6 The Researcher’s Experience in Shaping this Study ................................................................. 9
  1.7 Definition of Key Terms .......................................................................................................... 10
  1.8 Overview of the Thesis ............................................................................................................ 14

Chapter Two ..................................................................................................................................... 16

Literature: International Assignments ............................................................................................. 16
  2.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 16
  2.2 Organisational Motives ........................................................................................................... 17
  2.3 The Changing Forms of International Assignment ................................................................. 18
  2.4 Alternative Forms of IAs ......................................................................................................... 24
    2.4.1 Short-term IAs .................................................................................................................. 24
    2.4.2 Frequent Flyers, Commuter IAs and Global Virtual Teams ............................................. 25
  2.5 Individual Motivations ............................................................................................................. 28
  2.6 Experience .............................................................................................................................. 30
    2.6.1 Adjustment ..................................................................................................................... 30
    2.6.2 Acculturation ................................................................................................................ 32
2.6.3 International Careers................................................................. 33
2.7 Career.......................................................................................... 34
  2.7.1 Defining Career ................................................................. 34
  2.7.2 Success.............................................................................. 36
  2.7.3 Mobility ........................................................................... 40
  2.7.4 Career Capital ................................................................. 44
2.8 Theoretical and Methodological Approaches used in IA Research .... 48
2.9 Summary .................................................................................... 51

Chapter Three .................................................................................. 53

Literature: Chinese MNCs and Assignees............................................ 53

  3.1 Introduction.............................................................................. 53
  3.2 Chinese MNCs ........................................................................ 53
  3.3 Context ................................................................................... 56
    3.3.1 Institutional Factors ....................................................... 58
    3.3.2 Cultural Factors ............................................................ 59
  3.4 Chinese Careers ................................................................. 62
    3.4.1 Changing Patterns ......................................................... 62
    3.4.2 Key Themes from the Academic Literature .................. 65
    3.4.3 Chinese Careers in the IA Literature ......................... 66
  3.5 A Review of the Chinese Literature on Careers and IAs .......... 73
    3.5.1 Key Features ............................................................... 76
    3.5.2 Relevance to This Study .............................................. 82
  3.6 Summary .............................................................................. 83

Chapter Four .................................................................................... 84

Method ............................................................................................. 84

  4.1 Introduction.............................................................................. 84
  4.2 Research Philosophy ............................................................. 85
  4.3 Research Approach ............................................................... 87
  4.4 Research Method ................................................................. 89
    4.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews ......................................... 90
    4.4.2 Researcher Value ......................................................... 92
Chapter Five ................................................................................................. 121

Motivation to Accept an IA ........................................................................... 121

5.1 Introduction .............................................................................................. 121
5.2 Overview .................................................................................................. 122
5.3 Adventure ................................................................................................ 123
5.4 Challenge .................................................................................................. 126
5.5 Subsidiary Motives .................................................................................. 131
  5.5.1 Job Requirement .................................................................................. 132
  5.5.2 Right Time ........................................................................................ 136
  5.5.3 Money ................................................................................................. 138
5.6 The Interdependency of Motives ............................................................... 140
5.7 Summary ................................................................................................... 145

Chapter Six .................................................................................................... 147
Chapter Eight ........................................................................................................................................... 229

Conclusions ................................................................................................................................................ 229

8.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 229
8.2 Overview of the Study .......................................................................................................................... 229
8.3 Research Questions .............................................................................................................................. 230
  8.3.1 Contributing Empirical Data ........................................................................................................ 230
  8.3.2 Motivations ................................................................................................................................... 231
  8.3.3 Experience ................................................................................................................................. 233
  8.3.4 The Context of Career Capital .................................................................................................... 235
8.4 Theoretical Contribution .................................................................................................................... 237
  8.4.1 Career Capital .......................................................................................................................... 237
  8.4.2 Dynamic Context ...................................................................................................................... 240
  8.4.3 An Integrated, Multi-dimensional Approach ............................................................................ 240
  8.4.4 A Theoretical Model ................................................................................................................. 241
8.5 Methodological Implications ............................................................................................................ 241
8.6 Practical Implications ......................................................................................................................... 243
8.7 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research ........................................................................... 245
8.8 Reflections of the Researcher ............................................................................................................ 248

References ................................................................................................................................................ 250

Appendix A - Statement of Contribution Containing Publications ...................................................... 294
Appendix B - A List of Chinese Papers from Major Research Publications ........................................ 296
Appendix C - Interview Invitation ......................................................................................................... 300
Appendix D - Information Sheet ............................................................................................................ 302
Appendix E - Participant Consent Form ................................................................................................ 307
Appendix F - Sample Interview Protocol ............................................................................................. 309
Appendix G - Human Ethics Approval Letter ......................................................................................... 315
List of Figures

Figure 2.1. The Intelligent Career: Interplay among Three Ways of Knowing.............47
Figure 4.1. The Research Process.................................................................................. 97
Figure 5.1. Motives for Accepting an IA..................................................................... 122
Figure 5.2. Adventure as a Dominant Factor............................................................... 124
Figure 5.3. Challenge as a Dominant Factor............................................................... 127
Figure 5.4. Subsidiary Factors for Accepting an IA.................................................... 133
Figure 5.5. Overview of IA Decision-making: The Role of Career Capital............... 141
Figure 6.1. IA Experience............................................................................................ 149
Figure 6.2. IA Adjustment........................................................................................... 151
Figure 6.3. IA Satisfaction........................................................................................... 165
Figure 6.4. Perceived Social Integration during an IA................................................ 173
Figure 6.5. Changes in Career Capital during an IA................................................... 190
Figure 7.1. Connecting Motivation, Experience with Career Capital......................... 211
Figure 7.2. Contextual Factors Influencing Career Capital........................................... 217
**List of Tables**

Table 3.1. Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) (Management Category)......................................................................................................................... 75

Table 4.1. Participant Information................................................................................ 103

Table 4.2. Summary of the Sample’s Characteristics................................................... 104

Table 7.1. Linking Career Capital, Motivation and Experience of an IA....................... 204
List of Related Publications

Refereed Journal Articles


Book Chapter


Professional Presentations and Participation


Note: Statement of Contribution is attached (Appendix A)