

The following paper was accepted by the International Journal of  
Human Resource Management in 2013

Please cite using the following details:

Yao, C. (2014). The impact of cultural dimensions on Chinese expatriates' career capital.  
*International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(5), 609-630.

# The impact of cultural dimensions on Chinese expatriates' career capital

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The existing expatriation literature confirms that international assignments (IAs) are an essential tool for developing international talent and global managers. However, the majority of relevant studies are conducted in Western developed contexts and neglect the effects on individuals from emerging countries such as China. In the Chinese multinational companies context, this paper explores the concept of career capital comprising knowing-how, knowing-whom and knowing-why. Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, it investigates the impact of IAs on an individual's career capital. Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with Chinese expatriates were conducted. Results suggest that the Chinese expatriates develop limited career capital from IAs. The research shows that the Chinese culture plays an important role in shaping organisational practices and individual behaviours and, consequently, the development of expatriates' career capital. It goes beyond the current individual and organisational focuses on IAs to include a cultural perspective on the development of career capital. Implications are rehearsed, exposing areas for further research.

Keywords: career capital; Chinese multinationals; cultural dimensions; expatriates; international assignments

## Introduction

The development of career capital by expatriates has attracted considerable attention in the dynamic global business environment in which individual mobility across cultural boundaries becomes more habitual. While international assignments (IAs) are positioned to be important for organisations to transfer and implement international strategies (De Cieri 2005) and generally beneficial for individual career development (Stahl, Miller and Tung 2002; Suutari and Brewster 2003), the impact of IAs on career capital is not sufficiently clear. Major research themes on career impact focus on motivation (e.g. Dickmann, Doherty, Mills and Brewster 2008; Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso and Werther 2012), adjustment difficulties (Shaffer, Harrison and Gilley 1999; Andreason 2008), IA experiences (e.g. Jokinen, Brewster and Suutari 2008; Kreng and Huang 2009; Welch, Steen and Tahvanainen 2009) and repatriation issues (e.g. Kraimer, Shaffer and Bolino 2009; Jokinen 2010). Among these studies, national culture is considered as an important context that mediates the development of expatriates' careers (Tang and Russ 2007). However, little is known about the relationships between national culture and career capital. Our qualitative study, therefore, explores the career experience of expatriates by drawing on both career capital and national culture literature. We use Chinese expatriates as a cultural-specific sample to examine the development of their career capital from IAs.

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This research contributes to the existing literature on expatriation in several ways. First, we extend the knowledge of career capital by utilising a unique and under-researched sample of Chinese expatriates working for multinational companies (MNCs) in Western countries. Second, we address an important research question in the literature: whether or not IAs are beneficial for expatriates' careers? By investigating the perceived cultural value of IAs, we aim to understand the nature of international career development.

In this paper, we first position our topic within the current literature by identifying a research gap in the areas of career capital and national culture, and by arguing the importance of understanding Chinese MNCs and their expatriates, which no prior research has investigated. We then outline the research questions and define the method used to address them. We describe our findings, compare them with existing research and relate cultural factors to career capital. To conclude this paper, we present the implications of these findings and highlight directions for future research.

## Literature review

This paper deals with two streams of literature: career capital and cultural dimensions. In the first part, the concept of career capital is explored focusing on the current knowledge on the development of career capital from IAs. Then, the paper moves to cultural dimensions analysing their relevance in the Chinese context. Finally, the paper brings together both areas of the literature and analyses the potential influence of culture on Chinese careers. At the end of the literature review, we identify research gaps and develop research questions.

## Career capital

The resource-based perspective views career as 'a portfolio of capitals' (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer and Meyer 2003, p. 734) that an individual develops through work and personal life. Under this perspective, career capital is seen to consist of three ways of knowing (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994a; Inkson and Arthur 2001).

Knowing-how competencies reflect career-relevant skills, expertise, implicit and explicit knowledge that accrue over time (Inkson and Arthur 2001). These capabilities 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. Knowing-why competencies relate to career motivation, personal understandings and identification (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994b). They provide individuals with a sense of meaning regarding their careers and motivation to pursue career goals. Knowing-whom career competencies reflect 'the attachments, relationships, reputation, sources of information and mutual obligation that people gather as they pursue their careers' (Inkson and Arthur 2001, p. 52), including contacts within organisations and external contacts, such as business partners, or personal social connections, such as friends (Parker and Arthur 2000). Knowing-whom capital follows the social resource theory, which postulates that individuals gain advantages through accessing or using their social networks to obtain salient resources such as career advancement (Lin 1999).

The current literature on IAs, mainly based on expatriates from Western, developed countries such the USA, the UK and Australia, suggests a positive impact of IAs on career capital. Despite adjustment difficulties and repatriation issues such as 'career wobbles', expatriates appreciate the value of international experiences and believe that IAs will contribute to long-term career progression. More specifically, an expatriate may

develop technical skills related to different operational and general business contexts (Stahl et al. 2002; Makela and Suutari 2007; Jokinen et al. 2008) as well as international competencies such as cross-cultural skills (Dickmann and Harris 2005; Kraimer et al. 2009), local knowledge (Li and Scullion 2010) and social skills (Jokinen 2010). This knowing-how capital is often considered essential for global management development and is highly valued by expatriates and their organisations. However, studies also indicate that some of these skills may not be transferable to the home context and therefore have limited influences on expatriates' career progression (Harris, Brewster and Sparrow 2003).

Research on knowing-whom capital shows a diverse picture. Expatriates may develop new networks at subsidiaries from work-related activities (Makela and Suutari 2007) as well as personal social interactions (Jokinen 2010); they may face difficulties to develop new local connections due to language and cultural issues (Dickmann and Harris 2005), and challenges to maintain their existing networks in the home country (Stahl and Cerdin 2004). While expatriates acknowledge the importance of maintaining and developing knowing-whom career capital because it provides career benefits such as access to information and resources, it is unclear in the current research on the development patterns of these resources and the utilisation across different cultural boundaries.

Knowing-why career capital is often addressed by investigating IA motivations, and research finds that internal factors such as career goals and desire for change are important components for accepting an IA (Makela and Suutari 2007). During an IA, expatriates experience changes such as questioning personal norms and values (Dickmann and Harris 2005), becoming more self-aware (Jokinen 2010), rethinking their relationship with the company (Dickmann and Harris 2005) and developing global career mindsets (Kohonen 2008). Although these changes are anticipated during an IA, especially considering the difficulties experienced during the adjustment process, these studies do not provide in-depth knowledge of how knowing-why career capital develops, or of the drivers behind such development. There is also little known about how these changes impact on individual career decisions.

Overall, the current literature on career capital confirms the impact of IAs and changes in expatriates' career capital; however, these findings are based on expatriates from Western countries, and there is limited knowledge on Chinese expatriates' experience and how the development of their career capital is compared to the findings from the current literature.

### Cultural dimensions and Chinese culture

National culture is 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another' (Hofstede and McCrae 2004, p. 58). In order to understand the differences between countries, culture has been classified by dimensions in many studies including Hofstede's (1980, 2001), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1997) and the Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness Research Project studies (House et al. 1999). Of these, the most recognised model is Hofstede's five cultural dimensions (Table 1). Many of these studies' findings are correlated to Hofstede's conclusions, with some authors suggesting that Hofstede's cultural dimensions are 'probably the dominant explanation of behavioural differences between nations' (Williamson 2002, p. 1392). This model, however, has not been without criticism.

The debate that evolved was extensive, but it generally focused on two questions: Does Hofstede's model capture 'true' cultural differences? How valid are his findings in today's

Table 1. A summary of the Chinese culture using Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension.

| Cultural dimensions        | China's score (world average) | Level | Cultural characteristics                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Power distance (PD)        | 80 (56.5)                     | High  | Acceptance on uneven distribution of power.<br>Respect organisational hierarchies.<br>Individual behaviours are shaped by authorities and rules.<br>Individual behaviours should be within their social rank. |
| Individualism (IM)         | 20 (40)                       | Low   | The importance of family.<br>The importance of good guanxi (over task and skills).<br>The impact of individual behaviours on their social identity.<br>The differences between in-groups and out-groups.      |
| Masculinity (MT)           | 66 (50)                       | High  | Personal satisfaction is driven by objective achievement.<br>The need to ensure success.<br>Highly competitive working environment.                                                                           |
| Uncertainty avoidance (UA) | 30 (65)                       | Low   | Acceptance on unclear information and unstructured situation.<br>Risk-taking on career behaviours.<br>Being adaptable and flexible to changes.<br>Intuitive decision-making.                                  |
| Long-term orientation (LT) | 118 (45)                      | High  | Focus on long-term goals.<br>The importance of maintaining mutual benefits in long term.<br>Prefer job stability and security.                                                                                |

fast changing, globalised environment? In what appears to be one of the most damning critiques of Hofstede's work, McSweeney (2002) claims that the complexity of national culture is far beyond a simple classification of cultural characteristics. He questions its methodological validity claiming that Hofstede's research is based on flawed assumptions and the findings are poorly justified. Similarly, Ailon (2008, p. 900) believes

the space of meaning beyond the 'facts' of difference—the representational space whereby things like distinct appearances and habits or divergent answers to questionnaire forms come to mean particular things—is as much worthy of theoretical attention as the so-called facts themselves.

Further, other scholars argue that culture is not static (e.g., Abramson and Inglehart 1995; Fang 2012): Countries such as China are subjected to the forces of modernisation and consequently their cultural orientation will change over time.

In spite of criticism, researchers have favoured this five-dimension framework because of its clarity, parsimony, and resonance with managers (Kirkman, Lowe and Gibson 2006). Large-scale studies (e.g., Chinese Culture Connection 1987; Schwartz 1994; Smith, Dugan and Trompenarrs 1996) published since Hofstede's (1980) work have 'sustained and amplified Hofstede's conclusions rather than contradicted them' (Smith and Bond 1999, p. 56). Researchers have used Hofstede's framework successfully to select countries that are culturally different in order to increase variance, and that most country differences predicted by Hofstede were supported (Kirkman et al. 2006). Indeed, as a useful measuring device in cross-cultural research, the value of Hofstede's cultural dimensions cannot be

disregarded, especially in examining distinctive cultural settings (such as comparing China with the West). Although it is recognised that the Chinese culture has become more 'Western' as it becomes wealthier, its relative distance from other cultures have not changed much in the past decades (Hofstede 2001). For instance, while China may be shifting towards individualism, it is still on the collectivistic side in the global arena.

Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, we observe key characteristics of the Chinese culture, which may have influence on individual careers (Table 1). Chinese social groups have much greater power distances than their Western counterparts. The uneven distribution of power is both prevalent and accepted in Chinese society, and has significant implication for individual behaviours and management practices (Kats, van Emmerik, Blenkinsopp and Khapova 2010). Chinese employees respect the hierarchies within organisations and behave within their social rank. Promotion by seniority is still apparent in Chinese organisations where employees acknowledge the importance of following explicit and implicit rules in order to progress in organisations.

China is a highly collective society that promotes the importance of following group norms and maintaining harmony between group members (Pun, Chin and Lau 2000). One key characteristic of collectivism in China is the importance of *guanxi* (networks or personal inter-relationships). These relationships and networks provide access to information and resources and, consequently, enhance both career satisfaction and achievement among Chinese employees (Zhang, Liu, Loi, Lau and Ngo 2010). In Chinese organisations where the reward systems are egalitarian and not related to performance, interpersonal relationships become more important for influencing decisions regarding promotion and other rewards. Another key Chinese collectivism is that it is based on family (Wong 1985). Family needs are sometimes more important than personal satisfaction.

China is a more masculine society in which objective career achievement such as promotion and monetary benefits are more important than subjective success such as personal satisfaction (Briscoe, Hall and Mayrhofer 2012). The need to succeed results in a highly competitive working environment where employees are willing to take challenging tasks such as IAs even with personal/family sacrifices.

Although there is a discrepancy among the literature in terms of the level of China's uncertainty tolerance dimension, the majority of (and more recent) studies consider China at the low end of uncertainty avoidance, meaning that Chinese are more risk-averse and tolerate ambiguity (Hofstede 2007; Fang, Zhao and Worm 2008). For example, Shen (2006) highlights that Chinese companies do not have clearly structured IA selection procedures and seldom provide IA training. This, however, does not impact on employees' motivation on accepting IAs nor does it impact the effectiveness of implementing international tasks. Chinese are flexible and adaptable to changes such as working in a new environment.

Long-term career focuses such as lifetime employment are more apparent in a long-term-oriented society such as China, where workers focus on stability and job security (Hofstede 1980). Although there is little presence of lifetime employment (termed as 'iron rice bowl') in China, the preferences for job stability and organisational commitments are still important. Consequently, Chinese employees focus on long-term career goals instead of immediate benefits. For example, Chinese people do not tend to reject managers' IA decisions because of concerns that this may have a negative impact on their future career opportunities (Shen 2006). They also focus on maintaining long-term personal relationships, which may provide mutual benefit in the future.

## The influence of culture on careers: the research questions

While there is no research directly exploring the relationships between national cultures and expatriates' careers, some attempts have been made on outlining the possible cultural impact on organisational practices. Organisations are culturally driven, meaning that their structures and practices are strongly associated with the cultural context they are in. Using the organisational context as the mediating factors, culture and career development are interrelated. For example, Kats et al. (2010) explore the association between culture and career development focusing on the mediating role of HR practices, and argue that cultural expectations of employers (as to how to manage) may act in concert with cultural expectations of employees (as to what it means to be managed and to have a career) in ways that are likely to impact on employees' careers. Although the study tends to be hypothetical and lacks empirical approval, it provides a foundation on the direct and indirect relationships between national culture and career capital. Furthermore, Stead (2004) claims career theories as cultural construction and national culture play an important role in career choice and decision-making. In the Chinese context, Pun et al. (2000) argue that China's unique cultural heritage and collective orientation has a pervasive influence on the mode of Chinese management which influences individual behaviours such as career development.

All in all, these studies offer some valuable grounds for the current research and identify important research gaps in the literature. IAs represent a challenge to both organisations and employees, and significant parts of these difficulties are related to cultural issues. On the one hand, individuals develop careers across cultural boundaries while facing challenges to adjust to a new cultural environment. On the other hand, the value of their career development from IAs is evaluated within the organisational context, which was a product of social and cultural influences. National cultures play an important role in shaping expatriates' careers. Therefore, a key objective to this research is to explore the role of culture in expatriates' careers and understand their career development from IAs. Two questions in particular are central to this research:

- . How do Chinese expatriates develop career capital during an IA?
- . What is the role of the Chinese culture in shaping their career capital development?

## Method

The extant literature fails to make the connection between career capital and cultural dimensions. An exploratory and interpretive approach is therefore required to understand the complexity of expatriates' career development. Tarique and Schuler (2010) suggest that because the field of global careers is relatively young, qualitative methodologies are useful in providing rich information to facilitate theory building. The research questions in this study specify 'how' issues. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, have been highlighted by many researchers as the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why' 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 such as expatriation (Robson 1993; Yin 1994; Remenyi, Williams, Money and Swartz 1998).

We utilised semi-structured interviews that offered an iterative approach to probe underlying explanations and provided opportunities to conceptualise and explain matters of interest through a process of articulation that they might not have conducted previously (Yin 1994). Semi-structured interviews take advantages from both structured and unstructured interviews and aim to maintain a balance between focus and flexibility

(Yin 1994). While a list of themes was generated from the literature with a focus on the research questions, open-ended questions allowed new themes to emerge and develop from interviewees' responses (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The interviews, ranging in length from 40 to 65 minutes and an average of 45 minutes, were recorded with permission. Although many interviewees have a reasonable understanding of English, communication in Mandarin helped build trust and removed the problem of losing important cultural characteristics of language.

### Sampling

One of the reasons for the lack of research in this field may be because of the difficulties of accessing Chinese expatriates, and building trust in the Chinese context (Cooke 2009), for this reason, snowball sampling was considered appropriate. Initial participants were recruited by using personal networks and were then asked to help identify additional participants. A total of 28 expatriates (n = 28) were located using this sampling technique. Although a key limitation of snowball sampling can be a lack of representativeness, the sample obtained covered a wide range of demographic, geographic and occupational variables (Table 2).

### Analysis

We followed the template analysis approach (King 1998) that lies between content analysis where there is a predetermined list of codes and grounded theory where there are no predetermined codes. The process allowed new themes to surface and develop from the data and therefore to form new ideas. A list of nodes was generated from the literature and was used to code the transcriptions while new nodes were developed where they are not available in the literature. Nodes were then compared and categorised into themes. QSR NUD.IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising) or NVivo 9 was used to facilitate the process of classifying, sorting and arranging information, examining relationships in the data and linking themes to form theories.

### Findings

Research findings are presented in three sections following three ways of knowing. Major themes are summarised and shown in Table 3.

#### Knowing-how

In general, individuals were positive about the international experience particularly in the areas of 'soft' skills development. One that was frequently mentioned by expatriates was language skills.

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/emails in English which I had not done before. (Male, IT)

However, other expatriates commented on only limited improvement. A low level of fluency was sufficient to meet the job requirements because a majority of the job tasks was with Chinese colleagues, and they only had to use English to communicate with external

Table 2. Interview sample demographics.

| Sample demographics           | Expatriates |      |
|-------------------------------|-------------|------|
|                               | N           | %    |
| Number of interviews          | 28          | 100  |
| Age                           |             |      |
| Average; SD                   | 27.32; 1.59 |      |
| [Min., Max.]                  | [25, 32]    |      |
| Gender                        |             |      |
| Male                          | 21          | 75   |
| Female                        | 7           | 25   |
| Marital status                |             |      |
| Married without children      | 4           | 14.3 |
| In relationship               | 10          | 25.7 |
| Single                        | 14          | 50   |
| IA destination                |             |      |
| Australia                     | 2           | 7.1  |
| Europe                        | 6           | 21.4 |
| UK                            | 7           | 25   |
| USA                           | 4           | 14.3 |
| New Zealand                   | 5           | 17.9 |
| Others                        | 4           | 14.3 |
| Length of current IA (months) |             |      |
| Average; SD                   | 11.04; 7.79 |      |
| [Min., Max.]                  | [2, 28]     |      |
| Previous IA experience        |             |      |
| Yes                           | 15          | 53.6 |
| No                            | 13          | 46.4 |
| Company classification        |             |      |
| Bank1                         | 4           | 14.3 |
| Bank2                         | 2           | 7.1  |
| Construction1                 | 4           | 14.3 |
| IT1                           | 3           | 10.8 |
| IT2                           | 2           | 7.1  |
| Telco1                        | 6           | 21.4 |
| Telco2                        | 7           | 25   |
| Job position                  |             |      |
| Engineering                   | 3           | 10.7 |
| IT                            | 8           | 28.6 |
| Management                    | 5           | 17.9 |
| Marketing                     | 3           | 10.7 |
| Project management            | 4           | 14.2 |
| Software development/support  | 5           | 17.9 |

business partners. They also doubted the practical value of their language skills when they returned to China.

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, engineering)

Another knowing-how capability identified was cross-cultural interpersonal skills. While participants did not have high expectations for the development of certain cultural skills such as improved understanding and sensitivity on different cultures, they felt that they became more comfortable in dealing with different people. Although not discussed, the impact of these new skills on their career was again probably limited, as once they are back in a Chinese organisation; many of these skills would lose their functionality.

Table 3. Career capital of Chinese expatriates.

| Career capital                                     | Individual reporting to career capital (N)/(%) |
|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Knowing-how</b>                                 |                                                |
| Limited improvement in language skills             | 23/82                                          |
| Development in interpersonal skills                | 17/61                                          |
| New ways of doing things                           | 14/50                                          |
| General industry understanding                     | 11/39                                          |
| Limited (no new) technical skills                  | 10/36                                          |
| <b>Knowing-whom</b>                                |                                                |
| Guanxi is the most important career success factor | 26/93                                          |
| New networks are temporary                         | 25/82                                          |
| Interactions with other expatriates                | 21/71                                          |
| Barriers to non-work-related networks              | 17/61                                          |
| Maintaining contacts with HQ                       | 16/57                                          |
| Personal friendship                                | 15/54                                          |
| <b>Knowing-why</b>                                 |                                                |
| Family is my priority                              | 26/93                                          |
| Self-awareness                                     | 20/71                                          |
| Broaden views                                      | 16/57                                          |
| Changes in IA motivation                           | 15/53                                          |
| Chinese identity                                   | 15/53                                          |
| My future is in China                              | 13/46                                          |
| Personality changes                                | 10/36                                          |

Other knowing-how capital pointed out by the interviewees was related to the adjustment processes to new working environments. This entailed transferring existing skills to a new environment and adjusting to suit the local condition. Other development, particularly of technical or functional skills, was limited, as participants had often been selected specifically because of skills they already had, or they were especially trained at the headquarters to complete a task on expatriation. Hence, the expatriates knew the IA would be within their capabilities and there was no expectation of learning new or different skills. Similarly, organisations did not expect expatriates to develop new skills or knowledge.

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 technician)

If I want to improve my technical skills, it would be better to stay in China where most of the training takes place. Our company often makes sure to send someone who has the required skill sets. (Male, software development)

### Knowing-whom

Knowing-whom career capital involves interpersonal networks and resources. An important and dominant knowing-whom theme was the influence of guanxi in the Chinese organisational context. Having a good guanxi with managers and colleagues provided access to career opportunities such as IAs and increased the chances to progress within the organisation. It was therefore important for expatriates to maintain guanxi with their managers and colleagues at headquarters during an IA.

Being liked (by managers) definitely helped me to get this IA opportunity. There is no formal procedure 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)

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 to bring presents every time I go back to China. (Male, marketing)

Despite these efforts, expatriates found it challenging to maintain their existing networks during IAs. They found that 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 can erode their social ties.

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)

During IAs, participants considered little increases of 'knowing-whom' competencies. Their social and work networks were limited to local employees, clients and business partners. These networks were considered 'temporary' and did not anticipate a potential impact on their careers. Also, because the expatriates 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.

I don't really have the opportunities 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 expatriates. I don't really feel like making new friends. After all, the culture is different. (Male, engineering)

Another interesting finding was the importance of personal, non-work-related networks, such as friendships with their university classmates, 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)

Several respondents identified the difficulty of maintaining personal networks due to lack of personal interaction during an IA.

My contacts with old friends have decreased as well; being away makes it difficult to keep in contact. 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 it, 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)

## Knowing-why

Knowing-why career capital includes motivation on IA experience, perception on future career opportunities and understanding of career value. In general, Chinese expatriates perceived positive influences of IA on their knowing-why. These included changes in characteristics, better assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, and development in certain aspects of their personality (i.e. becoming more flexible, open to new things and non-judgemental in any situation):

An old Chinese saying: You can know more by travelling thousands of miles than by reading thousands of books. The more I see the more changes in my mind. And it has changed my views on how to look at things in the future. (Male, software developer)

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

These changes have also caused expatriates to re-evaluate their initial motivations for accepting the IAs. More than half of the respondents indicated that they became more realistic about expectations from the international experience.

I did not know what to expect before coming to the UK, but now, after working 6 months, I began to think about the value of this (IA) and what I am going to do in the future. (Male, banking)

The importance of different factors began to be re-prioritised. For example, nearly 70% of respondents said one of the most important motivations for accepting IA was financial benefits but after working on an IA for a while, the economic value of this experience was no longer significant:

I accepted this IA because of the high salary, I thought I could save money to buy an apartment in Beijing but 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)

Other factors such as family responsibilities, including looking after parents or raising a family, became more important in making future IA decisions such as whether to accept another IA or whether to return back to China earlier.

Both of my parents are in China, they are getting older so I need to make sure I am close to them to look after them. This is more important than just developing my own career. (Male, manager)

I am getting older 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)

More than half of the respondents affirmed that the international experiences have strengthened their cultural identities and the desire to go back to China.

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, marketing)

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

Overall, these changes in knowing-why were strongly related to the Chinese culture. Nearly half of the respondents noted that their long-term career focus is in China and nearly a third of respondents said they will not accept another international posting.

## Discussion

This study has two significant findings. First, there were notable differences to previous research on the impact of IAs on expatriates' career capital. Second, we provided explanations on these differences using a cultural perspective.

Contrary to the extant literature that suggests that expatriates develop career capital from IAs (Stahl et al. 2002; Jokinen et al. 2008) and believe IAs will help them advance in their careers and organisations (Suutari and Brewster 2003), this study found that Chinese expatriates develop little career capital and IAs are not recognised as important for career progression. A comparison between the current research and the literature is presented along with cultural rationales for these differences (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparisons between the research findings and the literature, and their associations with cultural dimensions.

| Career capital | IAs impact from the research                                                                                                     | IAs impact from the literature                                                                                                            | Related cultural dimensions                                                                                                                           |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Knowing-how    | No significant changes in technical or position-specific skills<br>Most skills are developed at headquarters                     | Increases in job-related knowledge and skills<br>IAs are used as developmental tool- new skills (e.g. managerial and cultural) are gained | Reluctance to adopt Western practices (PD)<br>Specification on job requirements and responsibilities (PD);<br>high organisational hierarchy (PD)      |
|                | Improvement in Language skills but has limited usage after return                                                                | Development of local competencies such as language skills that lead to more career opportunities (e.g. transfer to another country)       | Less emphasis on the utilisation of IA learning (PD);<br>high organisational hierarchy (PD)                                                           |
|                | New ways of doing things – mainly due to the adjustment process to the new working environment                                   | Development of new skills that are transferable to other positions                                                                        | Less emphasis on organisational learning (PD)                                                                                                         |
|                | Other developments in knowing-how (e.g. interpersonal skills) but tend to be temporary and do not have long-term career benefits | Inter-cultural competencies and social skill: have long-term benefits for global careers                                                  | Newly acquired skills have less usage in the highly competitive job market (UA);<br>organisational use of IAs: implantation rather than learning (PD) |

(Continued)

Table 4 – continued

| Career capital                                                       | IAs impact from the research                                                           | IAs impact from the literature                                                                                                                                         | Related cultural dimensions                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Knowing-whom                                                         | Maintaining existing guanxi (networks) is important                                    | Existing networks decrease due to absence                                                                                                                              | The importance of good guanxi (over task and company)(IM)                                                                   |
|                                                                      | New networks are limited and temporary – no significant career impact                  | Difficulties due to the language and issues of trust but some development of new networks from subsidiaries (both within the organisations and from external partners) | The differences between in-groups and out-groups (IM); focus on long-term career goals (LT)                                 |
|                                                                      | Most social networks are with other expatriates, barriers to non-work-related networks | Develop new networks through social interactions especially for expatriates with children                                                                              | The differences between in-groups and out-groups (IM)                                                                       |
|                                                                      | The importance of personal (non-work-related) networks to careers                      | Differences between personal and work-related networks (strong ties vs. weak ties)                                                                                     | The importance of good guanxi (over task and company) (IM); the importance of maintaining mutual benefits in long term (LT) |
|                                                                      | Less emphasis on developing new contacts                                               | Developing new contacts is part of the job requirement                                                                                                                 | Focus on long-term goals (LT)                                                                                               |
| Needs to maintain good guanxi with supervisors and managers in China | Difficult to maintain existing networks (out of sight, out of mind syndrome)           | Respect organisational hierarchies (PD); the importance of maintaining mutual benefits in long term (LT)                                                               |                                                                                                                             |

(Continued)

Table 4 – continued

| Career capital | IAs impact from the research                                                                  | IAs impact from the literature                                                                                              | Related cultural dimensions                                                                      |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Knowing-why    | Family needs are the priority in making career decisions                                      | Individual needs and career goals are important: career success and satisfaction                                            | The importance of family (IM); individual behaviours should be within their social rank (PD)     |
|                | IAs do not change career orientation, prefer job security and stability                       | Rethink of their relationships with the company: more flexible and open to new opportunities                                | Focus on long-term career goals (LT)                                                             |
|                | Monetary benefits are an important motivational factor but the importance decreases over time | Initial motivation of accepting IAs has not changed (e.g. not for economic reasons, more on experiences/career advancement) | Personal satisfaction is driven by objective achievement (MT)                                    |
|                | Long-term career goals are in China                                                           | Want to retain the international aspect in their future careers                                                             | Focus on long-term goals (LT); the impact of individual behaviours on their social identity (IM) |
|                | The importance of maintaining the Chinese identity                                            | Global career identity                                                                                                      | The impact of individual behaviours on their social identity (IM); the importance of family (IM) |
|                | Experience less difficulties adjusting to a new environment                                   | Adjustment difficulties are common especially for expatriates with partners and children                                    |                                                                                                  |

### Knowing-how career capital

The main differences in the development of knowing-how career capital between Chinese and Western expatriates are that Chinese employees develop little technical or transferable competencies and those skills obtained from IAs such as language skills and interpersonal skills are context sensitive and may not generate practical value after returning to China. In a Chinese organisational context, the roles of expatriates often are to ensure the implementation of organisational practices from headquarters, instead of being the learning mechanism for the organisations. Compared to their Western counterparts, Chinese MNCs are mainly state-owned enterprises and their international strategies and practices are strongly shaped by political needs such as direct control and resource acquisition (Alon and McIntyre 2008).

Pun et al. (2000) further suggest that national culture affects Chinese organisational structures and practices. Despite the fast development and rapid international growth of Chinese MNCs, traditional Chinese cultural norms such as high power distance, long-term orientation and collectivism are still evident within organisations. As a result, Chinese MNCs are highly hierarchical. Seniority and organisational rankings are important for career progression. In comparison, the development of knowing-how from IAs may have limited contribution to expatriates' careers. Therefore, Chinese expatriates do not actively focus on developing their knowing-how career capital during IAs.

### Knowing-whom career capital

There are also clear differences in the development of knowing-whom career capital between Chinese and Western expatriates. While Western expatriates focus more on developing local and new contacts, which help them with job tasks and provide possible access to future career opportunities (Jokinen 2010), Chinese expatriates put more effort in maintaining their connections with their headquarters. There are several reasons. First, Chinese expatriates value networks (*guanxi*) over other factors such as skills and experiences in terms of their career progression. Chinese expatriates treat their managers with more respect and tend to focus on maintaining good existing networks instead of developing new ones. Although the study found that Chinese expatriates experience similar difficulties in maintaining their networks at headquarters as outlined in the literature, findings indicate that they put more emphasis on reducing negative impact of being away from their networks. For example, Chinese expatriates are proactively making contacts with their managers and peers for work- or non-work-related issues. China is also a society with a long-term orientation; therefore, expatriates concentrate on personal investment such as building *guanxi* for long-term mutual benefits. Networks at subsidiaries are considered as temporary and do not offer long-term career benefits. Chinese expatriates are not interested in developing non-work-related networks from IAs as many of the interviewees have determined their long-term career ground is in China.

### Knowing-why career capital

A dominant factor affecting IA and career decisions is family issues. This is similar to what is known in Western literature that family factors such as spouse' willingness and children's education are important in IA decision-making (Fish and Wood 1997; Shaffer et al. 1999; Andreason 2008). Despite the individualistic cultural contexts, Western expatriates often have to make decisions involving relocation of family members and therefore collective benefits are important. The differences are, however, that, in the

Chinese context, there is a strong tendency of influences from expatriates' parents in the IA decision-making. This is partially due to the needs to look after their parents as most of the respondents are in their mid-20s and are the only child in the family as a result of China's 'one child' policy. But more importantly, Chinese expatriates are under social pressure that emphasises 'the importance of controlling selfish and greedy behaviours and the importance of spontaneous behaviours that are beyond the explicit role requirements but essential for the society' (Rotundo and Xie 2009, p. 88).

Furthermore, objective measurements such as promotion and monetary benefits are important for determining expatriates' motivation of accepting IAs. This forms a contrast to what is outlined in the literature that Western expatriates accept IAs not for economic reasons but more for experiences and career advancement (Jokinen 2010). The study also found that Chinese expatriates' perceptions on IAs are dynamic: the significance of economic benefits decreases over time and other cultural factors such as being close to the family and key guanxi become more important. During IAs, Chinese expatriates become more realistic on the return from IAs. Although economic benefits are significant, other cultural elements begin to function to form an overall effect on their career decisions.

Compared to Western expatriates, Chinese expatriates are less active in participating in a non-work-related social environment. This is partially because of the language difficulties, but more importantly, as indicated by respondents, it is because they are not interested in getting familiar with the new society while their long-term career goals are in China. Preserving their Chinese identities are important as it helps them to maintain close connections with their families and organisations. Unlike Western expatriates who develop international competencies and global identities through IAs, and have desires to retain the international aspect in their future careers (Makela and Suutari 2007), most Chinese expatriates we have interviewed expressed that they do not want to take another international position. They show strong desires to return to their familiar cultural context. This provides an interesting argument: maybe (some elements of) the Chinese culture plays a significant role in motivating expatriates to return to their homeland. Or maybe some individual differences such as age or family structures are important in influencing their decisions to go back to China. But what is clear is that the Chinese culture plays a significant role in determining expatriates' motivations on IAs and their perceptions on career development.

### The value of IAs

The differences in perceptions on the value of IAs are also shown in the comparison between this and extant studies. While Western expatriates perceive IAs as valuable opportunities for professional and personal development, Chinese expatriates perceive them more as parts of the job requirements. Their focus is, therefore, on ensuring the completion of allocated tasks and maintaining existing connections within their headquarters. The different perceptions are also reflected on organisational focus of the use of IAs. For Western MNCs, the motives are typically 'knowledge transfer, management development, the creation of a common organisational culture and the building of effective informal information networks' (Harzing and Van Ruysseveldt 2004, p. 259), and with an increasing need to develop competent global managers who are essential for integrating international strategies (Cappellen and Janssens 2005). In comparison, Chinese MNCs use IAs for administrative, financial control and technical requirements (Shen and Edwards 2006). Many Chinese MNCs use expatriates as a 'control mechanism' in order to maintain a close fit with the Chinese headquarters.

## The context of career capital development: individual, organisational and social domains

The different perceptions on IAs of both expatriates and their organisations support the notion that the development of career capital is contextual (Harris et al. 2003; Jokinen 2010). Career theories suggest that careers are affected by contextual factors that can be separated into several levels (Briscoe et al. 2012). On the individual level, careers are shaped by personal characteristics and needs. For example, Judge, Higgins, Thoresen and Barrick (1999) found that 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). There is an increasing acknowledgement of personal influences on careers. Career concepts such as the ‘boundaryless’ (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994a) and the ‘protean’ careers (Hall and Moss 1998) are regularly used to investigate individual influences on career development.

On the organisational level, careers are influenced by organisational structures, practices and processes. The perceived value of IAs determines the development, transferability and utilisation of career capital by organisations. Organisational strategies are operationalised and transferred to corresponding expatriates management practices (Dowling, Festing and Engle 2013). The Chinese organisational contexts, as previously discussed, present different international HRM strategies influenced by its specific social and political environment.

On the social level, careers unfold within the cultural context shaped by economic, institutional and historical influences. In the case of Chinese expatriates, 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. For example, Chinese expatriates’ career decisions are not only driven by the fact that IAs are beneficial for their own career success but also by the needs to contribute to their family’s welfare and reputation.

While some studies have investigated either individual or organisational impact on career capital, no research has investigated the integration on these dimensions and more significantly, there is no research examining how national culture influences individual behaviours, organisational practices and therefore expatriates’ career development. Individuals are guided by their cultural values to make appropriate career decisions. Numerous studies compare career behaviours and find significant differences between countries (e.g. Stahl and Cerdin 2004; Hamori and Koyuncu 2011). Furthermore, the cultural context affects employees’ careers through everyday activities in the office such as directions on what behaviours are appropriate (Briscoe et al. 2012). 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 expatriates develop their careers.

All in all, the value of IAs and the impact on expatriates’ careers are highly dependent on individual and organisational evaluation on the usefulness of international experiences. Individual behaviours and organisational practices are both culturally driven and, therefore, the development and utilisation of career capital is influenced by the cultural context that expatriates are embedded in. In integrating the research findings with the extant literature, we therefore propose an integrated model of the development of career capital in the international context (Figure 1). We argue that expatriates develop their

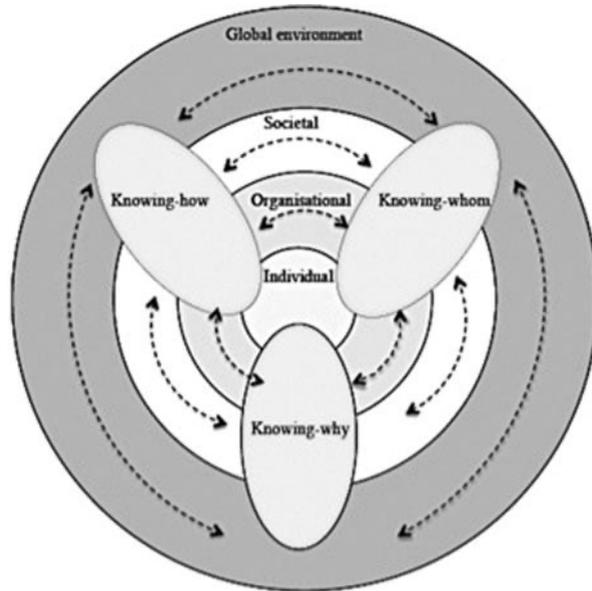


Figure 1. An integrated model: the context of developing career capital from IAs.

careers in three different domains: individual, organisational and cultural, and different factors influence career decisions and choices such as the development of career capital. Also, we believe that national culture plays a fundamental role in shaping individual behaviours and organisational context, and therefore influence the development of career capital.

## Conclusion

In summary, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature examining the impact of IAs drawing on the notions of career capital and cultural dimensions. It goes beyond the current individual and organisational focus in research on IAs to include a cultural perspective on the development of career capital.

Our findings suggest a different IA experience of Chinese expatriates, and there are clear associations between cultural dimensions and career capital. First, it found Chinese expatriates develop limited career capital from IAs. The findings contribute to the literature by providing further explanations on how each of the knowing is influenced from expatriation and showed that Chinese expatriates, an under-researched sample, have different experiences in the development of career capital. Second, we examined a set of cultural factors and how they influence individual careers. By using Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, we concluded that culture plays a dominant role in shaping organisational practices, individual behaviours and therefore career development. Furthermore, this study explored the unique Chinese MNCs context. The necessity was triggered by the emerging significance of China, its unique cultural context and its connections to other Asian cultures. We finally incorporated our findings with the extant literature and offered an integrated and multidimensional framework explaining the associations between different dimensions. It offers directions for future research in the areas of career development.

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 insights to understand IA experiences. The use of a semi-structured interview method relied on expatriates' self-reports on their careers and organisational practices, and further studies can implement multi-method strategies or select various stakeholders (e.g. HR managers, senior management) to gain different perspectives on issues. Also, the current study has not tested the significance of variables such as cross-industry differences or gender differences. Further studies can investigate their impacts and how they fit into the theoretical frameworks. The majority of interviewees in this study are within the age group of 20 – 30 years and the lengths of IAs are mostly short. Although these are the characteristics of Chinese expatriation, it would be useful to see if any other types of IAs or expatriates have similar experience. Also, due to the limited research scope and objectives, this study did not aim to generate a theoretical framework. Instead, it proposed an integrated model emphasising the importance of three domains in expatriates' careers. Further studies can conduct systematic analysis on the model investigating the interrelationships between different factors/domains. Lastly, the study is limited to Chinese MNCs and whether findings can be applied to other contexts need to be tested. Comparative studies of different countries can be useful in enhancing the understanding on the influence of culture.

#### Acknowledgments

I thank Dr Kaye Thorn and Prof James Arrowsmith of the Massey University School of Management, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also thank Massey University, Asia NZ Foundation and Human Resources Institute of New Zealand for their financial support.

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