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Exploring motivations in Chinese corporate expatriation through the lens of Confucianism

Christian Yao *Massey University, New Zealand*

James Arrowsmith *Massey University, New Zealand*

Kaye Thorn *Massey University, New Zealand*

There is increasing interest in the human resource management strategies and practices of Chinese multinationals, including the important area of overseas assignments. This article focuses on the neglected area of employee perspectives, in particular workers' motivations for accepting an international assignment (IA). It is based on qualitative interviews with 31 individuals recruited through a snowball technique. In contrast to the established (western) literature which understands IA motives from an individual rational-instrumental perspective, this study stresses the importance of Confucian values on motivations and in particular how these relate to perceived collective obligations to the family, the organisation and society. It is argued that the results add a different perspective for the academic study of IAs and have implications for the successful management of IAs more generally.

Keywords: Chinese MNCs, Confucian values, international assignment, international HRM, motivation

Key points

- 1 Understanding expatriates' social needs are important to improve the effectiveness of international human resource management practices.
- 2 Confucian values influence Chinese expatriates' international assignment decisions.
- 3 The study emphasises the relevance of perceived collective obligations (to the family, the organisation and the society) in the Chinese context.

The management of 'expatriate employees' helped define international human resource management (IHRM) as an independent field of academic enquiry, as well as establish it as a distinct organisational function within multinational companies (MNCs). The

Correspondence: Dr Christian Yao, School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington, RM 1012 Rutherford House, 23 Lambton Quay, Wellington 6041, New Zealand; e-mail: christian.yao@vuw.ac.nz

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internationalisation of business, which has been accelerating since the 1980s, dramatically increased the volume of what are now termed ‘international assignments’ (IAs). Changes in technology and the re-formulation of traditional careers have substantially transformed IAs, notably in terms of duration and objectives (Bozkurt and Mohr 2011; Meyskens et al. 2009). Reflecting this, there is now a proliferation of research investigating how and why organisations manage IAs, and with what results, and a growing interest in employee motives and experiences (Scullion, Collings and Gunnigle 2007).

An important research need is to understand why employees decide to accept an IA as this will determine their enthusiasm for, and expectations of returns from, the posting. Research has identified a number of possible motives including career benefits and financial gains (Doherty, Dickmann and Mills 2011), international experience (Segers et al. 2010) and host-country appeal (Haines, Saba and Choquette 2008). These ‘individual’ factors are sometimes usefully contextualised by organisational influences on these motivations (Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso and Werther 2012). A major weakness of the literature, however, is that it remains heavily focused on IAs from developed countries, notably the United States of America, United Kingdom and Japan as an Asian comparator (Vo 2009). This is incongruous given the rapid growth in the number and size of MNCs from large developing countries such as China, India and Brazil. It is also limiting from a conceptual point of view, in that it offers an incomplete understanding of how socio-cultural factors might influence organisational practice and individual sense-making around the IA. Most discussion in the field of IA motives is at individual and organisational levels, with direct links to career impact. However, organisations and individuals are socially embedded in their environment and affected by forces that require them to adapt their structures and behaviours to deal with their respective contexts. Hence, employee motivations and expectations might be shaped in different contexts by a varying balance of perceived social obligations and narrower instrumentalism at both the individual and organisational levels, but this remains only partially explored.

This paper responds to this research need by adopting a qualitative approach to study the motivations of Chinese MNC employees assigned to work in the West. It is based on interviews conducted with 31 corporate assignees working in 12 developed countries, and answers a call to better explore IAs with non-western, and specifically Asian samples (Cho, Hutchings and Marchant 2013). The findings suggest that conventional motivations relating to individual career and adventure are significant, but that there are also dynamics and tensions introduced by perceived social obligations to the family and to the organisation. Analysis of the results indicates the relevance of Confucian principles as a cultural framework that informs employee motivations and decision-making, as well as interpretation of experiences.

In the next section, we contextualise the research in terms of individual motives, extant research and Confucian values. The third section outlines the methods, before moving on to the results. The discussion and conclusions section elaborates the argument that, at one level, the motivations of Chinese expatriates interviewed in this research resemble those established in the mainstream western literature, but they need to be understood in terms

of perceived social obligations that emphasise reciprocity, obligation and social status. Implications for future research are then discussed.

Individual motives and the potential significance of Confucian principles

Corporate assignments are a personal choice driven by a range of individual considerations and organisational incentives. Employees who accept an assignment normally expect to learn new skills, enhance social networks, and develop a more 'global mindset' that will be beneficial for their career progression within and between organisations as well as to gain immediate financial reward (Story et al. 2014). A number of studies also emphasise non-work motivators in the relocation decision, such as experiencing different cultural contexts (Hippler 2009). Thus, new experiences obtained from an IA may not only deliver instrumental benefits in professional terms but also reflect individual desires for personal development and satisfaction. Familial issues such as spousal influence and children's education are also strong factors in the decision-making process (Doherty and Thorn 2014).

Assignees' motives can thus be explained in intrinsic and extrinsic terms (Haines, Saba and Choquette 2008). Individuals may seek varying combinations of extrinsic fulfilment (such as promotion and monetary rewards) and intrinsic satisfaction (such as cultural experience) in deciding whether to accept an assignment, and These motives also inform their subsequent experience of the posting (Hippler 2009). Yet the interrelationships between the intrinsic and the extrinsic, and between the individual and organisational, remain unclear in terms of motivations (Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso and Werther 2012).

The understanding of the interplay of these associations within the Chinese context is especially limited. There is an increasing interest in IHRM in Chinese MNCs, mainly from an organisational perspective (Warner 2012). The IA field is still largely an unknown territory, especially concerning expatriate experiences. A review by Wood and Mansour (2010), for example, found only 14 articles published on Chinese expatriates between 1996 and 2007. Much of the recent research concerns issues such as cross-cultural training (Zhang and Fan 2014), IA adjustment (Wang, Freeman and Zhu 2013) and performance management (Shen and Jiang 2015). However, the motives of Chinese employees to accept an assignment, which strongly influence each of these areas, remain underresearched.

It might be anticipated that these motivations would be informed by cultural characteristics. China's contemporary culture is shaped by a blend of tradition and rapid modernisation that has led to a combined and uneven development but one still underpinned by enduring Confucian philosophies (Warner 2010). The core of Confucianism emphasises 'the importance of controlling for selfish and greedy behaviours on the part of individuals and the importance of social obligations in settings such as communities, institutions and families' (Rotundo and Xie 2008, 858). Most discussion of the behavioural implications of Confucianism focuses on the cardinal relations (*wulun*) characterised by the promotion of virtues, including humaneness (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), rite (*li*), knowledge (*zhi*) and integrity (*xin*). These have been elaborated along seven dimensions (Redding 2002):

- Order (C1): Maintenance of harmony, prestige, honour and face;
- Hierarchy (C2): Legitimacy of vertical status and authority;
- Reciprocity (C3): Importance of mutual trust and *guanxi*;
- Control (C4): Leaders direct employees and other resources;
- Insecurity (C5): Need to insure for long-term defences and build reserves;
- Family (C6): Importance of filial piety and family prestige;
- Knowledge (C7): Value of learning, wisdom and resourcefulness.

These Confucian values relate to interpersonal relationships within a variety of settings, including organisations. For example, social order, hierarchy and reciprocity provide structural expectations of mutual social exchange and harmony (Mak et al. 2014). The emphasis on 'harmonious' mutual relationships links to face (*mianzi*), which acts as a mechanism to promote respectful interactions between people (Byosiére and Luethge 2009), and *guanxi* which refers to 'the network of informal relationships within a social group or, at an individual level, to a particular individual's relationship ties with other individuals within this social group' (Bozionelos and Wang 2006, 1535). Chinese *guanxi* is based on informal, personal connections between individuals bound by an implicit psychological contract (Wei et al. 2010) and with a long-term focus (Leung 2008).

The Confucian element of control also reflects obligated relationships between superiors and subordinates, which is echoed in the centralised HRM practices of Chinese MNCs (Zhou, Zhang and Liu 2012). The notion of insecurity, from a cultural perspective, points to Chinese attitudes of taking a long-term orientation and 'preparing for a rainy day' (*weiyuchoumou*). Collectivism defines the differences between in-groups and out-groups, and a strong feature of Chinese collectivism is the importance of family (Tang, Siu and Cheung 2014). The well-being of a family (including its social prestige) is often considered to be more important than the interests of one individual. It is also socially expected that Chinese adults will care for their aged parents, a practice reinforced by limited state provision for eldercare and by parental investment in offspring in a context of rapid growth and dislocation. Lastly, knowledge, the seventh dimension of Confucian values, emphasises the importance of education in China. In the growing but highly competitive labour market knowledge and credentials can help leverage access to better jobs and social status.

Research has begun to explore the relevance of Confucian values in the Chinese organisational context. For example, Wong, Shaw and Ng (2010) argue that Confucianism tends to influence management styles, as well as employee attitudes and behaviours such as loyalty and conflict aversion (Li and Nesbit 2014). More generally, Warner (2013) argues that Confucian culture has a strong influence on Chinese approaches to HRM, such as an emphasis on collective responsibility and harmony at work. The historic cultural significance of Confucianism is also reinforced in the current Chinese political narrative, whereby an increasingly explicit adoption of Confucian values by the political regime seeks to legitimise single-party rule as benevolent government under the banner of a 'Harmonious Society' (Solé-Farràs 2014). The influence of Confucianism, therefore, has

again become prominent in many aspects of Chinese public life, including large and international enterprises which are still in the main state owned (Williamson and Zeng 2009).

The preceding discussion suggests that although the predominant focus of the (western) IA literature is on individualistic and instrumental concerns in terms of employee motivations, collective obligations might loom large in the Chinese context due to the legacy and reinterpretation of Confucian cultural maxims. Chinese cultural characteristics are likely to influence employees' perceived needs, goals and priorities, and therefore, their motivations for accepting an IA. The question is thus how far decisions around IAs are shaped by a particular social and cultural environment in which individual career concerns must deal with multiple and possibly competing obligations around the family, firm, team and managers. In this context, this paper is driven by two specific research questions. First, what are the motives of Chinese international assignees in accepting an IA? Second, are Confucian principles relevant in understanding the decision-making process?

Method

The distinctiveness of Chinese culture, novelty of IA expatriation and general lack of research into the employee experience necessitates exploratory work and favours specifically context-based rather than comparative research (Fang 2012). Cultural studies in business have been dominated by the positivistic etic approach typified by Hofstede (1991), despite a rigorous critique of its essentialism and reductionism (McSweeney 2002). In contrast, emic approaches (which favour culture-specific qualitative enquiry) have been largely overlooked, though they offer benefits in terms of generating insider-driven insights into attitudes and behaviours in underexplored contexts (Harris 2001). Notwithstanding this neglect, qualitative approaches are increasingly recognised as making a rich contribution to understanding cultural impacts in international business research (Birkinshaw, Brannen and Tung 2011; Doz 2011).

In this study, a qualitative method was adopted based on individual employee interviews in order to develop a new and deeper understanding of the motives of Chinese employees in undertaking an IA. The difficulty of gaining research access in the Chinese context is well recognised due to the need for personal connections (Cooke 2009). Here, the target population was also difficult to identify and locate. An indirect approach through organisational gatekeepers (such as HR) was unlikely to work (as indicated by initial attempts), and indeed risked introducing bias into the sample. Hence, a 'snowball' sampling method, which is based on respondent referrals, was chosen as appropriate in this situation (McPhail, McNulty and Hutchings 2014). The snowball technique is more than a convenience sampling method when respondents recommend other potential participants against clearly defined criteria, though it is accepted that it does impose limitations in terms of generalisability even given its exploratory nature (Richards 2009). The exploratory nature of this paper also limited the utility of a theoretical sampling approach, in which sampling is informed by the needs of emerging (grounded) theory rather than driven by respondent characteristics *per se* (Becker 1993).

It is also important at this point to acknowledge the role of researchers in qualitative studies that eschew the 'objectivity' of the positivist paradigm and recognise researchers as participants in the research process (Kvale 2007). That researchers bring their own implicit and explicit values to a study is not necessarily harmful (Baxter and Jack 2008). Indeed, Lofland et al. (2006, 70) 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 under consideration. Being a dynamic part of interactions with the research participants enabled us to better understand their individual stories and to scholarly reflect upon the cultural dynamics from their narratives.

The eventual sample comprised 31 assignees from seven Chinese MNCs working in 12 host countries (Table 1). The decision to stop seeking further respondents was dictated by the saturation criterion of Strauss (1987) in which no new themes emerge from further data collection, and the number of interviewees is in line with similar qualitative studies on international assignees that seek depth of insight rather than statistical representativeness (Altman and Baruch 2012; McPhail, McNulty and Hutchings 2014).

The average age of respondents was 27 years and the average duration of IA was just over a year (Table 1). Three-quarters were male and all but four were unmarried. The sample thus reflects two key characteristics identified by previous research. First, Chinese assignees tend to be younger than their western counterparts, largely because many companies prefer unmarried employees to reduce family complexities (Qin and Baruch 2010). For example, the studies of Selmer, Ebrahimi and Li (2000) and Wang, Freeman and Zhu (2013) both reported an average assignee age of 32 – 33 years, significantly younger than similar studies of western assignees (e.g. Doherty, Dickmann and Mills 2011; Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso and Werther 2012). These 'early career expatriates' might well have different motivations due to age and family circumstances, as well as their position in the corporate hierarchy. Second, 70% of IAs utilised by Chinese MNCs are short-term ones (Shen 2006). This practice too might be related to a felt need to minimise family disruption, though it could also involve visa considerations or that China is in the vanguard of a global trend towards shorter and more diverse forms of IAs that utilise new information and communications technology to serve a range of organisational objectives (Meyskens et al. 2009). These include developing employees and facilitating organisational learning (Zhang and Fan 2014) and traditional goals such as position filling, skill transfer or control (Collings, Scullion and Morley 2007).

A template analysis approach was adopted given the limited nature of pre-existing research (King 2004). This combines a framework for interviewing based on literature but also allows new themes and ideas to develop and be incorporated in the light of the data collection process. The interviews were semi-structured in order to frame a consistent approach while permitting flexibility to probe responses for underlying explanations. The approach was interactive and conversational including interview questions refined in light of earlier responses in order to bring focus to the important topics that emerged from respondents' own narratives (Agee 2009). This approach also provided interviewees the opportunity to generate and explain matters of interest that they may not have otherwise elaborated (Kvale 2007). The interview protocol covered a range of topics concerning the

Table 1 Summary of sample characteristics

Sample demographics	Expatriates N	%
Number of interviews	31	100
Age		
Average; SD	27.5; 1.7	
[Min., Max.]	[25, 32]	
Gender		
Male	24	77
Female	7	23
Marital Status		
Married without children	4	13
In relationship	11	36
Single	16	52
IA destination		
Australia	3	10
Europe†	6	19
UK	7	23
US	4	13
New Zealand	7	23
Others‡	4	13
Length of current IA (months)		
Average; SD	12.5; 7.6	
[Min., Max.]	[2, 36]	
Previous IA experience		
Yes	15	48
No	16	52
Company classification		
Bank	6	19
Construction	4	13
IT	7	23
Telco	14	45
Job position		
Engineering	4	13
IT	8	26
Management	5	16
Marketing	3	10
Project management	5	16
Software development/ support	6	20

†Europe includes: Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden. ‡Other countries include: Canada, Hong Kong and South Africa.

international experience, including motives for accepting a foreign posting, the adjustment process, the general assessment of that experience, the most liked and disliked aspects, and intentions to return to China. Background data were also collected, including information on the respondents, their families, and their organisations.

International dispersal required that most interviews were undertaken remotely by telephone although 13 were conducted face-to-face. Gaining trust with respondents is always important in order to 'learn' life stories and viewpoints effectively (Rubin and Rubin 2011). A common language was seen as an important relationship-building tool and Mandarin was used both to avoid any misunderstanding in translation and to assert cultural affinity and understanding. The mean interview duration was 45 minutes with a range of 40 to 65 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed in the original language. Ensuring the authenticity of data is vital to qualitative research (Kvale 2007), so data analysis was based on these Mandarin transcripts. Translation was conducted only for quotation purposes, with an independent translator validating the accuracy of the translation.

Coding data is also important for methodological rigour as it helps make sense of the relationships between essential constructs (Bansal and Corley 2011). The interview data were coded using NVivo 9 software which allows researchers to classify, sort and arrange information, examine relationships in the data, and combine analysis with linking, shaping, searching and modelling (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). NVivo 9 allowed us to code and analyse transcripts in their original form. This analysis involved a four-step process to minimise interpretative and classificatory bias. The first concerned information about respondents, such as gender, age, marital status, and assignment details such as location, duration, and job position. These attributes were examined to compare and link any demographic and occupational patterns. The second was to develop a category of topics that emerged from the data, using a topic coding technique to generate descriptions of the varieties of retrieved material and identify any patterns (Richards 2009). The third step was to develop thematic categories based on these descriptions and patterns, and the final one involved interpretation and explanation of the results. As in preceding studies, we use Redding's (2002) seven Confucian principles as the analytical construct in this paper as applied to cultural understanding of the IA motivational factors that emerged.

Results

The findings are presented and discussed thematically with supportive illustrative quotes, and tables and figures are used to summarise the qualitative data and to guide readers through the relationships between important concepts that emerge (Pratt 2009). Hence, Table 2 provides a summary of key categories of individual motives with representative narratives of participants.

Three broad categories of themes emerged from the NVivo analysis as important motives for accepting an IA. The first relates to 'personal gains', which include the adventure of going to a new country, improving individual skills and enhancing long-term career opportunities and financial benefits. The second category refers to 'organisational considerations'. This category

Table 2 Chinese expatriates' motives of accepting an IA

Motives	Illustrative quotes
Personal gains	<p>'I always wanted to do something different. The outside world has lots of unknown things but is very exciting to me'. (Male, IT)</p> <p>'I think this experience will be beneficial for my long-term career goal. It is very competitive in China; I had to make sure I had sufficient skill sets so I wouldn't be behind others in the future'. (Male, management)</p> <p>'I accepted this IA because of the high salary. I thought I could save money to buy an apartment in Beijing'. (Female, IT)</p>
Organisational considerations	<p>'I was new to the company, so I had to be careful about dealing with my managers. I didn't want to give them the impression that I was a picky person'. (Male, project management)</p> <p>'If I had refused it or been fussy about the opportunity, they would remember it for the next time. I don't think I will have another chance'. (Female, IT)</p> <p>'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)</p>
Demographic factors	<p>'It was a good time for me. My parents' health was quite good so I didn't need to worry about them being [behind] in China'. (Male, project management)</p> <p>'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)</p>

to some extent reflects an element of real or perceived compulsion detected in other studies, where early career employees felt that rejection might have deleterious consequences (Hippler 2009; Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso and Werther 2012). However, the disquiet was typically expressed less in terms of potential disadvantage than as an obligation to maintain good relationships with managers, including while overseas. The third category of motives, 'demographic factors', links to age and life-stage and perceived family support. The personal cost-benefit analysis in evaluating the expatriation offer was often influenced by it 'being the right time'. This links the decision to career and age, a theme which is less pronounced in the IA literature but is extensively covered in the careers field (Inkson and Arthur 2001).

These three categories of motives can be further explored in terms of the Confucian values indicated earlier using the NVivo analysis map. Each of the motivations provided by the respondents related to at least one of the Confucian cultural themes. For example, personal gains link to the need for security (C5), social status (C1), family prestige (C6), the potential accumulation of knowledge (C7) and hierarchical progression (C2); organisational consideration to harmony (C1), hierarchy (C2), reciprocity (C3), control (C4) and anticipated security (C5). Timing is largely a feature of family obligations linked to the demographic factors of the assignees (C6) and encouragement linked to esteem (C1). These features, which are indicated in Table 3, are now considered in turn.

Table 3 Confucian values and IA motivations

Confucian values	Data constructs							Illustrative quotes
	Personal gains			Organisational considerations		Demographic factors		
	Adventure	Skill development	Monetary benefits	Job requirement	Network obligation	Career/age stage	Family support	
C1: Order	Posting itself enhances personal prestige	Acquired skills and experience increase social esteem	Perceived higher social status as a result of high pay	Avoid disagreement and conflict	Maintain harmonious organisational networks	Need for young to show deference to elders	Family encourage participation	'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 society. And I want to make my family proud' . (Male, IT)
C2: Hierarchy		New skills may overcome hierarchical barriers for progression		Respect authority	Recognise role as a subordinate	Early career workers respectful of managers' knowledge and decisions		
C3: Reciprocity					Enhanced organisational networks in China and overseas	A valuable opportunity for young professionals to interact with international managers		'There are not as many messy cultural issues I have to deal with here [in 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)

C4: Control				Open to direction	Away from bureaucratic control at HQs	Need to show obedience to build career capital		'I don't need to worry about the guanxi side of things [here] and I wanted to get away from the bureaucratic [Chinese organisational] environment'. (Female, management)
C5: Insecurity	Demonstrates (long-term) commitment	Provides competitive advantages for long-term career plan	Protecting long-term financial situation		Build wider and long-term contacts			'I accepted this IA because of the high salary. I thought I could save money to buy an apartment in Beijing'. (Female, IT)
C6: Family	Increases family esteem						Fewer family obligations to dependants	'Their [parental] opinions were definitely important in making the [IA] decision. Of course, they would prefer me to stay closer with them but they also wanted me to have a good future'. (Male, management)
C7: Knowledge	Develops cultural competencies	Technical and cross-cultural learning						'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 could strengthen my mind. I think this is important to me personally'. (Male, management)

The centrality of Confucian teaching is about maintaining harmony with society, organisations and individuals (Wong, Shaw and Ng 2010), here expressed as the value of societal order (C1). In the expatriate context, this informs the acceptance of an IA in order to avoid disagreement or confrontation. Maintaining order is also associated with Confucian conceptions of obligation and esteem, which combine individualistic notions of self-differentiation with understanding of group expectations. A sense of an individual's own social status is important in this philosophy (Li and Nesbit 2014) and was frequently cited by respondents as a factor motivating their decision to accept an IA. Respondents' 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, 357 – 358).

More specifically, social harmony is associated with face culture in the Chinese context. Face is a sense of worth that comes from knowing one's status and reflects concern with the congruency between one's performance or appearance and one's real worth (Wong, Shaw and Ng 2010). For respondents, international travel offered the opportunity to augment social prestige and face value among peers and family beyond the workplace context.

The values of hierarchy (C2) and reciprocity (C3) also came through strongly from respondents. It is widely acknowledged in the literature that respecting hierarchy is an important factor for developing a career in the Chinese context (Huang and Aaltio 2014; Lo, Chen and Wilson 2013). Participants' comments on the potential negative implications of declining a manager's decision also show that the respondents recognised the importance of maintaining good *guanxi* with others in the organisation.

Interestingly, there was less evidence of acceptance due to direction, or objective control (C4), than in the softer sense of perceived obligation. There was also a strong suggestion that the need to accumulate vertical and horizontal *guanxi* added to perceived work pressures in the early career stages. Indeed, a number of respondents referred to the IA as a means to escape the close supervision of their managers. Several respondents used a Chinese proverb '*tian gao, huangdi yuan*' (heaven is high, and the emperor is far away) to describe their temporary adventure, and there was a view that the posting offered a degree of autonomy in that work would be less cluttered by interpersonal politics.

Insecurity or, more specifically, the need to build reserves to ensure a long-term future is also identified as a manifestation of Confucian values (Redding 2002; C5). This was articulated in the data more in the 'soft' sense of demonstrating commitment to building long-term career capital. Although respondents were hesitant to openly discuss remuneration as a key driver, perhaps reflecting cultural sensitivity in how they wanted to be perceived (Oyserman and Lee 2008), it also emerged as a consideration, particularly with a view to the future. Respondents considered it both in terms of immediate financial returns and as a means of building a more secure job with strong career development prospects.

The Confucian philosophy also strongly identifies the family as the core social unit and the filial duties of the child towards the parent are clearly defined (Kim and Gao 2010). This strong obligation to parents is intensified by the long-standing urban

one-child policy of the state and limited pension and welfare provision. In terms of family (C6), respondents felt the need for approval from their parents for the IA, and they were concerned at ensuring their parents were cared for in their absence.

Finally, in terms of knowledge and learning, the seventh Confucian principle (C7), the majority of respondents did expect to enhance their skills through the international experience, mainly in terms of general competencies. However, the appointment of these Chinese expatriates to jobs they had already proved they could do meant they were not anticipating much return in the way of direct enhancement of their technical, job-related capabilities.

Overall, the responses indicate that the process of IA decision-making involves a combination of different factors that inform the evaluation of potential gain and loss (Hippler 2009). There is clear evidence however that the guiding principles of Confucianism hold considerable influence for these young professionals. There was a strong sense of 'making decisions in the context' and respondents invariably referred to the impact of accepting the IA on their social identity, the need to be accepted by members within their peer group, and familial and organisational contexts (Wong, Shaw and Ng 2010). The findings suggest that Confucian values such as social status, family obligations and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships are primary motivations for accepting an IA for the Chinese expatriates. In contrast to much of the western literature, the more individually objective or instrumental considerations such as financial benefits, technical skill development or career capital accumulation were less readily apparent other than when they were perceived to make a contribution in an indirect or subjective way, such as enhancing perceived social status.

Discussion and conclusions

The academic field of IHRM has been criticised for isolating the organisation from its social context and for excessive concern with managerialist problematising uninformed by employee perspectives (Delbridge, Hauptmeier and Sengupta 2011). The study of IAs has also been critiqued for a failure to investigate how culture informs institutional practices and the attitudes, beliefs and expectations that individuals have about their current and future work roles (Li and Nesbit 2014). This paper offers a contribution to these deficits in the field of corporate expatriation by focusing on employee motivations to accept Chinese-to-western postings.

The results suggest that, on the face of it, motivations are somewhat similar for Chinese as for western assignees, notably concern around personal development, organisational expectations and availability, but underneath lies a more subtle and complex web of implicit and potentially competing cultural obligations to the firm, the manager and the family. Whereas the established literature endorses the primacy of objective or 'extrinsic' reasons for acceptance, such as skill development and financial benefits (Hippler 2009; Vo 2009), our findings suggest that intrinsic factors to do with status and broadening perspectives are more relevant to individual motivations for

Chinese assignees. These cultural and social motivators strongly inform the cost-benefit analyses that employees perform in deciding to accept the IA and how they approach the overall experience.

The research emphasises that, in a broader sense, career development and satisfaction are both related to social values. Each of the seven Confucian factors was found to be relevant to individual decision-making, in multiple ways, and notwithstanding the pace of transformation within the Chinese economy and MNCs. Indeed, increasing travel and work deployment overseas present new opportunities for the accumulation of 'symbolic capital' related to face and social status, so reinforcing Confucian cultural concerns (Yao 2013). The additional capital is significant not just in the individual sense of developing a marketable reputation but in a more collective process by enhancing connections within the organisation and in wider social networks.

Overall, the findings suggest that the primary considerations underlying the decisions of Chinese international assignees closely resemble those established in the mainstream western literature, but that they need to be understood in different ways. The elements of Confucianism were all evident in positioning individual expectations within a wider social context of perceived obligations that emphasised reciprocity and social status. The prominence of Confucianism is distinctive from much of the IA literature which focuses on career calculations in more narrow terms. Evidence from respondents suggests that similar considerations of the social influence of an IA might apply to the organisation itself, though the focus in our research is on the individual. Confucian cultural norms such as a strong orientation towards order and the importance of *guanxi* had an overall effect on the Chinese practices and processes of managing expatriates. This is not surprising since, as Pudelko (2006, 138) observes, 'societal-contextual factors' strongly influence 'the organisation of a country's HR system'. Social culture influences the way people think and make decisions and, ultimately, the way they perceive, feel and act, and people making decisions on behalf of organisations are affected too (Lok and Crawford 2004). Such cultural commonality is likely to be even more acute in the Chinese context given the influence of state policies and direction in the political considerations that most Chinese MNCs deal with (Fang 2011). It remains an area for much-needed research.

The findings have a number of broader implications for academic research and for organisational practice. First, the results lend qualitative support for the idea of 'Confucian work dynamism' (Chinese Culture Connection 1987), which Hofstede (1991) added as a fifth dimension to his cross-cultural model as 'long-term orientation' in belated recognition of the significance of Chinese values. In so doing the study emphasises that social motivators strongly inform the individual-level cost-benefit analyses that employees perform in deciding to accept the IA, and how they approach the overall experience. Second, there are broader implications not just in understanding Chinese expatriation but how the practice is conventionally conceived in the established western literature. For example, academic research could usefully explore the utility of notions of 'social capital' in terms of how employees perceive and respond to social expectations within and beyond

the workplace, to complement the narrower instrumentalism implied by the conventional IA career framework. Perceived career success is still inadequately conceived and researched in the IA literature (Abele and Spurk 2009).

This neglect might reflect a preoccupation in the western literature with the individual and his or her 'rational' calculations of investments and returns in career decision-making. Though some research attempts to capture individuals' subjective and intrinsic judgments about their professional attainments, such as job and career satisfaction (Haines, Saba and Choquette 2008), much of the field operates under a bipolar objective – subjective divide (Kohonen 2005). The findings from this research stress the importance of a dynamic and interactive approach to understanding motivations (Mayrhofer, Briscoe and Hall 2012). Here, the value of IAs is understood as a process of sense-making (Weick 2009). Personal evaluations of an IA are not an absolute representation of 'good' or 'bad' but a series of judgments around how the experience fits into one's specific individual and social situations. In the Chinese context in particular, individual perceptions of career satisfaction and success are strongly embedded in and interpreted through collective notions of social recognition and expectations. Research into how such factors might impact on IA motivations in other cultural contexts (regional as well as national) certainly would be useful.

Further, the relatively young age and junior positions of interviewees in this study offer contrasting demographic experiences to most of the current studies on corporate expatriates. As multinational companies are shifting to more diverse forms of IAs, it is important to acknowledge differences in terms of job responsibilities, IA durations and personal needs. Further studies could investigate these emerging young expatriates from both western and emerging nations and their career reality within a corporate setting. Cross-generational studies could be also useful in understanding individual and social patterns across different cultural and institutional contexts.

Methodologically, the acknowledgement of Chinese cultural factors such as the use of individual social capital to gain access to and use 'insider knowledge' to build trust offers scope for further useful work. In particular, how *guanxi* as a specific Chinese cultural feature is utilised as an important vehicle of social communication and influence is still underresearched (Lo, Chen and Wilson 2013). Little is known about the individual and organisational pros and cons of *guanxi*, and its implications for the rapidly emergent field of Chinese HRM. Future studies need to recognise and address the role of this subtle and sensitive aspect of decision-making in research design and analysis.

Finally, the concept of social capital is potentially important not only at the individual level but also collectively where it serves as a distinct organisational feature that informs IHRM strategies and practices (Bozkurt and Mohr 2011). The importance of social capital prompts research questions connecting with the political economy of the 'varieties of capitalism' school (Williamson and Zeng 2009). For example, in contrast to the fragmentation and mobility of careers associated with western firms, do MNCs from collectivist or Confucian cultures tend to emphasise investment in human capital and the importance of sustaining internal and external networks to cope with uncertainty and change? If so, the

organisational as well as individual motivations for and experiences of IAs will be very different from MNCs based in 'liberal market economies'. Such difference raises managerial implications. In the West, an organisational focus on incentives and compensation has driven IAs but these may not be adequate to sustain IA motivation and satisfaction. Understanding expatriates' social needs is important to improve the effectiveness of IHRM practices, especially given the increased (cultural) diversity and heightened mobility of the IA workforce (Cooke 2012; Yao, Thorn and Doherty 2014). Greater understanding of all these aspects is needed generally, East and West, in a context of the increased complexity.

This particular study is of course limited by its exploratory nature and its small sample of Chinese assignees. The research is in no way representative but instead designed to provide insights into the reflection and motivation of an underresearched but increasingly prominent group of IAs. As noted at the outset, Chinese assignees tend to be young and with fewer domestic constraints, but further studies could investigate how far different demographic characteristics influence individual perceptions. A larger sample which includes the experience of those married and with children (which conceivably will account for a growing proportion of IAs in the future) could also better take into account organisational motivations in terms of task or assignment objectives, ideally complemented with company-based research. Finally, understanding the placement of IAs to emerging economies, which is accelerating especially in the primary sectors (Cooke 2014), would also be valuable from a comparative perspective. The field of Chinese IAs, and those from developing countries generally, is indeed ripe for exploration.

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Christian Yao (PhD, Massey Uni) was on staff at Massey University in Auckland when this paper was written. He is now lecturer in human resource management in the School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. His background is in international human resource management, career development and mobility.

James (Jim) Arrowsmith (PhD, Manchester Metropolitan Uni) is a professor at Massey University's School of Management. He has published extensively across his primary research areas of flexible working time systems, variable pay, employee engagement and comparative IR, in Europe and the Pacific region.

Kaye Thorn (PhD, Massey Uni) is senior lecturer at Massey University's School of Management. Her recent research interests include self-initiated serial mobility, patterns of mobility and the impact of mobility on careers.

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