

This paper was accepted by Career Development International in 2013.

To cite this document:

Christian Yao Kaye Thorn Noeleen Doherty , (2014), "Boundarylessness as a dynamic construct: the case of Chinese early career expatriates", Career Development International, Vol. 19 Iss 6 pp. 683 - 699

Boundarylessness as a dynamic construct: the case of Chinese early career expatriates

Christian Yao and Kaye Thorn

School of Management (Albany), Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand, and

Noeleen Doherty

School of Management, Cranfield University, Cranfield, Bedford, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the dynamic nature of boundaryless careers of Chinese early career corporate expatriates. It also investigates the demographic and contextual factors influencing individual perceived career mobility.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 31 Chinese corporate expatriates were conducted and a template analysis approach was used to analyze the data. **Findings** – Results suggest that Chinese early career corporate expatriates' perceptions of boundaries as facilitating or limiting career mobility change over time. Changing boundary properties are found to be linked to the salience of Chinese cultural values, demographics and career/life stages. Based on expatriates' narratives, this study highlights how these demographic and contextual factors shape domains of career boundarylessness.

Originality/value – Using an under-researched sample of Chinese corporate expatriates, this paper contributes to the conceptualization of boundaryless careers identifying the changing nature of the boundaries that facilitate or restrict mobility over time. The study calls for the use of combined, multi-dimensional approaches incorporating individual agency, organizational and cultural factors to understand individual career development.

Keywords Expatriates, Careers, Social factors, Chinese multinational companies, Boundaryless career, International assignment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The continuing globalization of companies from both advanced and emerging economies has resulted in an increase in corporate investment in resources and technologies, and a high level of mobility of labor and human capital (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009). The literature explores the expatriation experiences of self-initiated and company backed expatriate employees and a substantial part of this stream of research examines career issues (e.g. Doherty *et al.*, 2013; Stahl *et al.*, 2002). Since the 1990s, the theoretical focus has shifted from the traditional “climbing the organizational ladder” to the “boundaryless career” where individuals enact their own career across numerous geographical, organizational and occupational boundaries (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Central to the emerging debate on careers is the argument that there are new forms of careers which depend increasingly on criteria determined by the external environment (such as marketability of expertise), external networks and information, and less on traditional organizational career arrangements (Lazarova and Taylor, 2009). This study aims to investigate the careers of Chinese corporate expatriates, who, by definition, are exhibiting certain degrees of boundarylessness in that they have been open to the possibility of an international assignment (IA) and they

have crossed geographical boundaries, to live and work in a different country (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996).

Boundaryless careers have been a focus of research over the last decade. While many papers celebrate the development of the concept (e.g. Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Segers *et al.*, 2008), others including Sullivan and Baruch (2009) identify limitations. Primary among these critiques is that the concept has an excessively individualistic bias which views career success largely as a function of individual proactive traits and the person-centered social networks built by individual action. As a result, it has neglected the institutional resources (Zeitz *et al.*, 2009) and social influences (Ng *et al.*, 2007) needed to support such careers.

A secondary limitation is the assumption that the boundaryless career implies no boundaries to career development. There are clearly boundaries, including professional qualifications, geographical constraints, work-life balance (Inkson, 2006) and the range of possibilities available (King *et al.*, 2005) which influence career decisions. There are, however, few studies that identify the full array of objective boundaries crossed by career actors (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Inkson and King, 2012). Existing research fails to consider how people perceive these boundaries or how people's careers are "shaped by a range of multiple and co-existing boundaries" (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010, p. 1170). The boundaryless career concept has yet to consider how various demographic characteristics, such as age and marital status, impact on a person's willingness to cross boundaries.

Finally, research adopting boundaryless perspectives has been largely focussed on advanced economies such as the USA, UK and Japan (Segers *et al.*, 2008). Exceptions include attempts to apply the concept of boundaryless career in an emerging economic context such as China (Lau *et al.*, 2013). Despite the increasing significance of Chinese companies abroad and the number of Chinese employees working overseas (Cooke, 2009), research is limited. Like their western counterparts, Chinese expatriates are sent on an IA to fulfill international tasks, develop global skills and, ultimately, achieve organizational goals (Shen, 2006). However, because of the cultural and business differences between China and other countries, particularly those in "the West" (Hofstede, 2001), differences in perceptions of the expatriate experience are to be anticipated (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009).

The paper contributes to the boundaryless career field in the following ways. Most importantly, this study contributes to the conceptualization of boundaryless careers. Boundarylessness is a presumed characteristic (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) of expatriates, but here, we identify the changing nature of the boundaries that shape mobility over time. Second, this study answers recent calls to study non-western samples (Tu *et al.*, 2006) particularly given the increasing participation of workers from emerging economies in the labor force.

Lastly, increased diversity in the workforce results in the need to understand the impact of culture and career development. Different values and norms and demographic variables influence people's willingness and experiences of mobility. Linking culture and demography requires a contextual lens.

This paper begins with a literature review, synthesizing the factors influencing expatriate mobility with the theoretical underpinnings of the boundaryless career, followed by a discussion of the methodology. Findings are then reported under key themes relating to contextual and demographical factors of career mobility. Next, a discussion of the pervasiveness of career boundarylessness among Chinese expatriates is provided. Finally, the paper develops conclusions about the social value of IAs and a bounded career orientation in the Chinese MNC context.

Factors influencing expatriate mobility

Doherty and her colleagues (Doherty and Dickmann, 2012; Doherty *et al.*, 2011), and Hippler (2009) have summarized the motivating factors for accepting a corporate IA. Prevalent among these are career development (see, e.g. Dickmann *et al.*, 2008) and financial incentives (Stahl *et al.*, 2002), although research suggests that the compensation packages offered are no longer as great as they once were (Suutari and Tornikoski, 2001). The intrinsic value of the IA including personal development (Biemann and Andresen, 2010) and the adventure of living in a new country (Thorn *et al.*, 2013) are important reasons driving expatriates' mobility. Factors hindering mobility are also identified in the literature, and include family issues such as the challenge of dual global careers (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011), and children's education (Tharenou, 2009).

Demographic variables are also recognized to influence mobility. Age is commonly identified as impacting on the decision (Selmer and Luring, 2011), often reflecting the expatriate's work experience and seniority. Consequently, most western expatriates are in the mid 30-40s age range (Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). Expatriation has, for the main part, been a predominantly male domain, often precluding the inclusion and progression of females. Barriers include individual reasons such as family ties and responsibilities (Doherty, 2013) and organizational prejudices (Tharenou, 2009). The literature also indicates that the majority of western expatriates are partnered (Beaverstock, 2005), and most will have their partners with them in the host country (Palthe, 2004). Analysis suggests, however, that women expatriates are more likely to be single than their male counterparts (Doherty and Thorn, 2014).

Very little has been written about the factors influencing a decision to undertake an expatriate assignment outside the western world, although Wood and El Mansour (2010) suggest that many of the drivers will be similar for non-western expatriates. There has been some discussion about cultural influences, including the fundamental philosophy of Confucianism. While there is little empirical evidence, aspects which are most likely to influence expatriation, include subordination and loyalty to superiors, a collectivist approach, and guanxi. In a hierarchical culture, employees may feel obligated to comply with a request from a supervisor to undertake an IA, regardless of their desire to do so. Further, a collectivist mindset would encourage a potential expatriate to do what is best for the company, again irrespective of personal aspiration (Wood and El Mansour, 2010). Guanxi, however, is likely to have the most significant impact on expatriation (Cho *et al.*, 2013). Guanxi refers to "the network of informal relationships within a social group or, at an individual level, to a particular individual's informal relationship ties with other individuals within this social group" (Bozionelos and Wang, 2006, p. 1535). It influences relationships both within and outside the workplace, extolling interdependencies, harmony and personalized relationships (Hofstede, 2001). Guanxi is, therefore, a central factor for maintaining or deepening connections with the home organization and developing contacts within a new organization.

Boundaryless career

Based on a resource-based view of individuals' working experience, a boundaryless career is one which can traverse organizations, occupations, industries and locations (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006), and boundaryless career actors are "mobile, self-determined [...] free agents who are able to seamlessly connect with work in multiple contexts" (Harrison, 2006, p. 20). In addition to these physical movements,

boundaryless careers also involve a psychological dimension, or the perception of the capability to make transitions (Marler *et al.*, 2002). Hence, the receptivity of the career actors to changes and the willingness to enact change is another component of boundarylessness. These psychological changes are attracting increasing attention in the literature (Lazarova and Taylor, 2009).

Although physical and psychological mobility in careers are often operationalized and measured separately (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006), they are not isolated constructs. The interdependency between them influences individuals' career mobility as demonstrated by Sullivan and Arthur (2006) and shown as Figure 1.

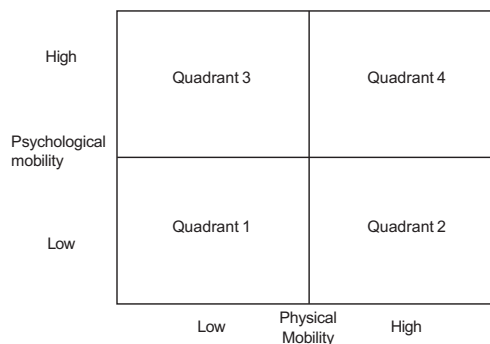
According to this model, careers in Quadrant 1 exhibit low levels of both physical and psychological mobility reflecting, for example, careers with low transferability such as highly specialized skills (the example of a NASA engineer is given by the authors). Careers in Quadrant 4 however, exhibit high physical and psychological mobility. Sullivan and Arthur (2006) provide the example of a management consultant working across industries and seeking personal growth both within and outside the workplace. Although not specifically discussed in their paper, (western) expatriates are also likely to fit into this quadrant, with physical mobility being inherent in their careers, and with the freedom and transferable skills to enable psychological mobility. In fact, several authors have also suggested that "boundarylessness" is becoming the career pattern for expatriates (Caligiuri and Lazarova, 2001; Stahl *et al.*, 2002). Sullivan and Arthur (2006) further imply that the extent of an individual's mobility on both dimensions could be influenced by gender, race or individual career orientation, but have no evidence to support this. This study seeks to provide empirical evidence on the boundaryless career concept, focussing particularly on the following questions:

RQ1. What contextual and demographic factors influence Chinese expatriates' career mobility?

RQ2. To what extent do Chinese expatriates demonstrate changes in the degree of their boundarylessness over time?

Method

This study is exploratory in nature, guided by an interpretive paradigm acknowledging that Chinese expatriates are likely to seek, define and redefine their



Source: Sullivan and Arthur (2006, p. 22)

Figure1.
Two dimensions of
boundaryless careers

social roles based on their own understandings of their international experience. By using semi-structured interviews and an inductive, qualitative, narrative analysis of these interview data, this study endeavored to provide rich descriptions of individual experiences and, more importantly to extend boundaryless career theory through new empirical insights (Kvale, 2007). In order to capture the perceptions of Chinese participants, a list of themes was generated from the literature and open-ended questions developed to explore and expand on these themes (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Snowball sampling was used as an appropriate approach in this study, acknowledging the importance of *guanxi* in the Chinese context (Cooke, 2009) and the challenge to locate and reach potential international participants (Bryman, 2001). A total of 31 expatriates from seven Chinese MNCs were located using this sampling technique. The sample size is in line with similar qualitative studies on corporate expatriates (Altman and Baruch, 2012; Dickmann and Harris, 2005) and satisfied Strauss' (1987) saturation criterion for qualitative data accumulation in which no new themes emerge from the data.

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, recognizing the importance of a common language as a relationship-building tool, and to avoid any misunderstanding in translation. The transcripts were maintained in their original form for analysis to avoid the risk of losing meaning through translation. They have been translated into English to provide quotes.

This study used "template analysis" (King, 1998) where a set of themes was developed from the literature prior to data analysis. NVivo 9.1 was used to facilitate the process of classifying, sorting and arranging information, and examining relationships in the data (Kvale, 2007).

The sample

The sample in this study consists of 31 Chinese participants who were working in a foreign country on a company task. The sample's characteristics such as gender distribution, job position and country of assignment and length of IA are summarized and included in Table A1. The average age of participants was 27 years, which is younger than samples from other studies of expatriate populations as noted previously. Males dominated the sample, with 77 percent, which is more in line with the gender breakdown of western expatriates (e.g. Doherty *et al.*, 2011; Dickmann and Harris, 2005). The average length of their posting was 12 months. Another characteristic that differs from western studies was the participants' marital status, with the majority unmarried, and all were posted internationally without their partners.

Findings

Using Chinese expatriates' interpretations of their IA experience, the following sections discuss key themes that influence individual career mobility.

Contextual factors

Guanxi. An important and dominant theme that emerged from both the literature and this research is the influence of *guanxi* in the Chinese organizational context. All participants identified the importance of maintaining good *guanxi* with managers and colleagues to provide access to opportunities such as IAs and increase the chance

of progression within the organization. Comments from the participants also emphasized the need to conform with the wishes of their superiors:

Being liked [by managers] definitely helped me to get this IA opportunity. There were no formal procedures to select an employee [to go onto an IA] , most of the time, managers decided who they want to send, so of course they will choose someone they like (Female, 27 years, IT).

Guanxi therefore was often an enabling factor in the relocation and facilitated boundarylessness. There is a similarity here to Harris and Brewster's (1999) notion of the coffee machine system, where employees discussed their availability for expatriation with people who would make the decision in informal settings. Hence, networking was important for all participants.

However, guanxi in the Chinese context was also viewed as a real obstacle to future mobility. The importance of Chinese guanxi meant it was essential for participants to maintain their connections with existing contacts in the home country (Guo *et al.*, 2013). Being based in a different location can increase the difficulties of maintaining key guanxi. Although participants were often in frequent contact with staff at headquarters, including collaborating on tasks, they believed the distance had the potential to damage their networks. The importance of personal interactions in order to maintain guanxi in the Chinese culture means that absences were seen to erode their social ties, and efforts were made to maintain their organizational guanxi during an IA:

We still keep in contact due to our work tasks but it's different because I don't have the chance to talk to them face-to-face, people tend to forget you and you become less important when you are absent too long (Male, 30 years, management).

It is important to be visible even though you are away from headquarters. For example, I ring my managers for their birthdays or Chinese festivals and make sure I bring them presents every time I go back to China (Male, 26 years, IT).

Respondents also acknowledged the importance of maintaining long-term guanxi and caution in changing organizations. Guanxi and the importance of maintaining strong connections in the home country create a boundary to mobility:

I cannot afford to change company too frequently because I will lose all the important things that I have gained over those years. For example, I will have to start my guanxi network again in the new company (Male, 32 years, marketing).

Family and social ties. The physical distance from home in China resulted in issues of identity and a related theme of "family and social ties" – participants' connections with their family members and China, and the need to be an accepted member of a group and desire to belong to something greater than themselves (Fiske, 2004). While participants developed some contacts which were mainly work-related during IAs, their desire to maintain close relationships with people in China was profound. One participant put it as "my heart will always be in China." Participants' comments showed a strong desire to go back to China. In fact, all of the participants considered that their futures lay in China, with implications again for future mobility. Social ties played an important role in their emotional connectedness (Chu, 2008). In total, 28 of the 31 participants also indicated that they would not accept another assignment because they want to remain close to their family and develop career goals in the Chinese context:

I think I definitely prefer to be in China [in the long-term]. I mean I have seen the world, and I think in many aspects, the experience has changed my views. But in comparison, the fact that I am Chinese and I want to go home is more important for me (Female, 28 years, management).

The difficulty encountered in sending Chinese nationals on IAs has been identified (Schmidt *et al.*, 2013), so it is not surprising that once they have gone, they feel the need to return. Further, family responsibilities emerged as an important theme connecting participants with their home country. In particular, 29 of the 31 participants who were the only child in their families found it challenging to fulfill their family duties while on IAs, with a direct impact on how they perceived the IA itself:

My parents are the most important thing to me at this stage of my life. Sometimes, I feel guilty to be this far away from them. They have given up lots of things for me, but I have left them to work on the other side of the world. The pressure sometimes is piling up to the point I just want to quit the job (Male, 26 years, IT).

We had some elderly Chinese parents in the apartment block. It was sad to see them walk around the block everyday. They might not have friends, family members [in Australia] and they couldn't speak English. They were lonely [...] This reminded me of my parents. I don't want them to be lonely (Male, 28 years, project management).

Hence, in contrast to other studies which suggest expatriates develop a more multi-cultural identity through IAs (e.g. Andreason, 2008; Konopaske *et al.*, 2005), the findings here imply that Chinese expatriates felt a strong need to preserve their cultural identity.

Filial piety, as an essential part of Confucianism (Kohonen, 2005), is the important virtue and duty of respect, obedience and care for one's parents and elderly family members:

I don't want other people to think I am an irresponsible son. China is different [to the West], the [public pension and health] welfare system is still not adequate and I need to make sure I look after my parents when they need me (Male, 25 years, management).

It is more difficult for a daughter I think. I am particularly close to my dad. Although he has never said anything, I know he wants me to be close to them [...] It is difficult. I just hope I can give them more back when I return to China (Female, 27 years, software support).

The social interpretation of role and how well that role is performed significantly impacts career motivation and perceived career mobility. This finding provides empirical support for King *et al.*'s (2005) suggestion that career opportunities are bounded by "socially determined perceptions of what is valued and appropriate" (p. 998):

At the end of the day, what's the purpose of career? It's not all about myself. I wouldn't be happy if I cannot fulfill their [my parents] needs even if I get good money, a good job and a good future, I won't be happy (Male, 27 years, IT).

They [my parents] worked hard to make me who I am today, that was their responsibility. But now, it is my responsibility to make sure that they are looked after and they can enjoy a peaceful retirement. My career? Of course it is important. But it is equally important to make them [my parents] proud (Male, 29 years, Engineering).

The sentiments expressed here echo the conceptual interpretations of "relational identity." As Andersen *et al.* (2002, p. 160) express it, the "self is relational-or even entangled-with significant others." Understanding the connections with significant others such as parents, friends and managers reflects the important collectivistic orientation of Chinese culture. Self-esteem derives from "intergroup comparisons, and the basic motivation is the welfare of the collective, placing a premium on common fate, cohesion, and group norms" (Sluss and Ashforth, 2007, p. 10). Indeed, it is relational identities that knit the network of roles and role incumbents together into a social system. Thus, Chinese expatriates appear to have a clear sense of what it means to be part of relational networks and this guides them in their career decisions.

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

Demographic factors – age

For some participants, the right time for accepting an IA was explicitly related to age:

It was the right time in my life as I was young and unmarried. I don't think I would make the same decision if I had a family (Male, 26 years, marketing).

I am still young, so it is a valuable experience to challenge myself (Female, 26 years, IT).

Participants clearly related age to personal (non-work) characteristics and responsibilities as well as career stage. It appeared that being young reinforced the desire for, or relevance of, adventure and challenge. It is well established that younger people have higher international mobility partly because they have fewer family issues (Thorn, 2009; Shaffer *et al.*, 2012). Super (1957) highlighted that increasing age is accompanied by a greater number of roles (responsibilities), and perceived obligations. In the context of making an IA decision, younger expatriates have fewer responsibilities whether as spouse, homemaker or parent, and have more freedom to focus on personal development, satisfaction and career possibilities. This facilitates respondent's perceived career mobility.

Timing

The findings in this section address the second research question, focussing on the changing nature of the IA and the changes in the degree of boundarylessness over time. *Accept an IA: being the right time.* A substantial number of participants (17/31) made comments ascribing the decision to accept an IA to life and career timing, forming a theme of the "right time":

I was a recent graduate [from university], so it was a good time for me to go on the IA. It was great to start high at the beginning of my career (Male, 26 years, IT).

The timing was right for the opportunity, because I hadn't put too much effort into developing my career yet within the organization. I don't think I would have accepted this assignment if I had my foundation such as guanxi stabilized within the company (Male, 30 years, management).

An important part of establishing and maintaining one's career is continuous investment in career capital (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). Yao (2014), highlighted that for Chinese expatriates, there was no expectation of learning new technical skills or developing new functional capabilities, rather they had been chosen specifically because they knew how to do the work in the foreign country, or they had been specifically trained to undertake their role. Participants acknowledged that being away on assignment meant that they might experience temporary departures from the career development process as well as the challenges of adjusting back to the original context. Being at the early stage of their careers meant that the loss to their existing career capital was minimized. This outlined the importance of context for career development.

Need to go back: being the wrong time. During their IAs, when the initial excitement was over, family needs became more salient and influenced participants

to re-evaluate this notion of the right time, and their connections with others such as family members:

I accepted this IA because of the high salary; I thought I can save money to buy an apartment in Beijing. Now, I don't really care about it anymore, I would rather get less money but stay with my family. Besides, with the current real estate climate [in Beijing], I will never save fast enough to buy an apartment (Female, 27 years, IT).

I don't think I am as excited as I was [when I first accepted the IA]. Yes, I was curious about the opportunity of going out but the reality is that it is just another job in a different location. I don't see any difference (Male, 26 years, software support).

These comments reflect the range of perceptions that many participants had according to the different phases of expatriation. When accepting an IA, Chinese expatriates, like their western counterparts (Carr *et al.*, 2005), sensed the importance of financial benefits and the desire to travel. However, during the IA, other circumstances such as the need to be close to family overtook the importance of these monetary considerations and excitement. The changing conditions re-prioritize participants' needs and affect the process of sense-making. The move from excitement to the realization of what was most important now emphasizes the dynamic nature of the IA within a temporal context.

Another interesting common theme revealed in this study is that the participants' perceptions of their age and family issues are dynamic and also culture specific, reflecting the norms in China:

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

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

Marriage and first childbirth normatively occur between 26 and 30 years old in China, similar to developed countries (United Nations, 2013). However, what is different is the degree of pressure to marry and have children. Single women over 30 are perceived by the Chinese to be "elderly" and unlikely to find a partner. Remaining single is not considered a viable option for most Chinese. Further, the narrative in this study was focussed on the return home to find a partner. Exploring romantic attachment in the host country was not seen as an appropriate or desirable option.

While there are few studies exploring Chinese understanding of age and associated family/social responsibilities, the evidence from all 31 participants shows that perceptions are influenced by their Chinese culture. In Hofstede's (2001) model, Chinese culture is considered to have a long-term orientation and a low level of uncertainty avoidance. This implies that Chinese expatriates might have a tendency to make early plans for the future, but being away from the home country increased uncertainty around future arrangements such as marriage, and therefore intensified those needs associated with age. Further, being a collective society in Hofstede's (2001) terms, Chinese are very concerned about their social duties and responsibilities even when they are away from China. Chinese norms concerning the collective definition of

personal responsibilities (e.g. doing certain things at different stages of life) seemed to be important when participants made their decisions.

It is important here to acknowledge that individual perceptions of age (characteristics and values) vary in different cultural contexts. These participants thought they were getting old as they approached their 30s, and felt social pressure to be married and settled in their careers. Their perception of their age and stage created a boundary to career mobility, restricting them to a return to China, in a permanent work position. Social and family responsibilities (such as the need to get married) facilitate participants' understanding of timing of career needs. Similarly aged people in western society may not have these same concerns. Cultural differences therefore need to be taken into account by researchers engaged in trying to understand age-related managerial issues in an international context.

Discussion

These Chinese early career corporate expatriates identified factors facilitating their career mobility. Their networks within the organization had provided the opportunity for the IA, and their age and lack of family constraints had made it possible for them to participate in the experience. However, while they were displaying characteristics of a boundaryless career, their perceptions of their future careers were not of continuing boundarylessness. In fact, the participants identified clear boundaries which would restrict further mobility. In particular, participants felt strongly pressured by family and society to "go back to China" to fulfill their responsibility to their parents. Conforming to Chinese cultural norms appeared important to them. An interesting pattern here is the perceived strength and importance of social pressure to get married and raise a family. For women, the pressure revolved around finding a partner and having children while men experienced the pressure of marriage and taking responsibility for the family. While marriage status is often considered as an individual issue in western societies, it has much wider implications in China.

Due to the collectivistic cultural norms and family traditions from the Confucian beliefs (Fan, 2000), personal status is often associated with family and social roles. Being single in the late 20/early 30 age range may challenge family reputation and social identity. Despite (indeed, because of) being far away from their social peers, young expatriates felt under more pressure to fulfill their social duties. For example, being away from China made finding suitable partners more problematic and hence many participants became more concerned to return home. Age and the need to get married are seldom explored in the literature because (western) expatriates are commonly accompanied by partners and therefore, a large number of studies focus on partners' adjustment during an IA (e.g. Andreason, 2008; Konopaske *et al.*, 2005). The findings here offer a further dimension to the IA literature recognizing that the work-life balance constraints Chinese expatriates feel are of a similar nature to those of western expatriates (see, e.g. Shortland and Cummins, 2007) but are salient at a different life and career stage. Findings also emphasize that gender differences may have an influence on the nature and extent of these issues. Work-life balance issues may also be exacerbated in the Chinese context by the traditional expectations of marriage and family, and the institutional framework of the one-child policy and limited social welfare.

Based on Sullivan and Arthur's (2006) two-dimensional model of physical and psychological mobility we suggested that expatriates might be located in Quadrant 4,

displaying high psychological and physical mobility. This study indicates that contacts in the home country facilitated physical mobility which was enabled by youth and lack of constraints. The desire to play out their careers in China, however, is a strong limitation to future physical mobility, while the importance of home country guanxi, and societal pressure and family responsibilities limit psychological mobility. While the Chinese expatriates were displaying boundarylessness in their relocation to employment in another country, their perception of their future careers was not reflecting this, suggesting future careers of low physical and psychological mobility, being situated in Quadrant 1. The boundaries perceived by these Chinese expatriates suggest that there may be some permeability between quadrants and that people can move from one level of boundarylessness to another.

We suggest that the positioning and the permeability of the perimeters of the matrix are dynamic, changing in response to various influences. We suggest that the degree of boundarylessness changes in response to a range of contextual factors. In this study, we have identified both individual (timing, age and life stage) and social (responsibilities of family and desire to marry) factors which alter the permeability of the dividers. There are likely to be other factors which have a similar impact, including perhaps external organizational factors such as a strategic withdrawal from a host country, or a change from home to host country management. Other broader international factors may also play a role in changing the psychological perception of boundarylessness. Political maneuvers such as the infiltration of Crimea by Russia or general unease as is witnessed in Egypt or Syria in 2014, can rapidly impact on the safety of a destination and a corresponding change in the expatriate's willingness to be relocated. In the context of a dynamic view of boundarylessness, these factors need to be investigated further, including an examination of the interplay between the various dimensions.

Relating this directly to the model, the move from Quadrant 4 to Quadrant 1 is not the only movement that could occur. The withdrawal of an organization from the host country and a return to the home country immediately affects the possibility of being physically mobile, but does not necessarily alter the psychological mobility of the individual. This scenario would suggest a move from Quadrant 4 to Quadrant 2. Other events such as unrest could result in a move to Quadrant 3, where the assignee is not returned home, but is less comfortable in the host surroundings and therefore displays reduced psychological mobility.

Another theoretical development proposed here is that the very same factors that facilitate boundarylessness, can become factors that subsequently hinder it. Hence, in this study, the driver of the desire to leave China to see the world which led to the IA, became a realization of strong Chinese identity and the need to go back to China to re-establish there. This extends our way of thinking about boundarylessness from a polarized view of motivations and detractors, to recognition that these too can be dynamic, changing in response to altering perceptions of boundarylessness.

Conclusion

While it is increasingly acknowledged that international careers are becoming more boundaryless (Cerdin and Le Pargneux, 2009), this paper suggests that, at least for Chinese expatriates, boundaries still persist. While these expatriates may appear the epitome of boundaryless careerists, the reality is that the psychological boundaries associated with social pressure and the perceived lack of value of the IA, result in future physical boundaries. Chinese expatriates are bounded by cultural identity, filial

responsibilities toward parents, social expectations around marriage, the need for strong guanxi networks and the sense of a constrained time frame for international experience. Future career aspirations include a job back in China, located near their parents, and preferably within the same organization. The IA experience has a dynamic impact on the individual's longer-term career aspirations.

The paper adds further evidence to the developing debate on boundaryless careers. The findings here support a renewed focus on the underlying drivers of careers and the role of organizations and social ties in this globalized era. While this study acknowledges the role of individual agency in one's career development (Inkson, 2006), findings also highlight the importance of understanding cultural and social influences. Both the individual and the contextual perspectives provide useful material, but they need to be combined, for careers depend on the interaction of individual agency and the constraining or enabling aspects of the social context. In practice, the boundaryless concept is an ideal type (King *et al.*, 2005), lacking in practical application and empirical evidence. What is suggested here is that the concept is also dynamic, changing in response to perceived situations and life stages. This contextual view is in line with recent critical re-examination of the narrowly defined boundaryless career (e.g. Inkson *et al.*, 2012; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010; Yao, 2014), and provides empirical support (from Chinese expatriates) for broader and alternative interpretations of modern careers.

The implications of these findings are apparent at different levels. For the expatriate, there is a need to recognize the changing nature of an IA. Returning to the home country does not necessarily indicate an IA "failure" (Altman and Baruch, 2012), but an acceptance of differing perceptions over time. Viewing the IA as an opportunity for personal development is an important philosophy for post-IA resettlement.

From an organizational perspective, key implications involve the recognition that for Chinese IAs in particular, but possibly for many western IAs too, the lifespan of an IA is limited and there is a need for the organization to institutionalize their knowledge (Inkson and King, 2012), and reap the benefits of their experiences while they were in the host country. The effective transfer of knowledge from a departing IA to a new one is both time saving and has financial benefits. Further, Schmidt *et al.* (2013) identify the shortage of skilled talent for Chinese MNCs. There may therefore be advantages for Chinese organizations in recognizing the influence of social pressures such as marriage for valuable expatriates, and incorporating opportunities for return visits to China for those seeking partners, and expatriation for families as a part of their international HR practice.

Due to its exploratory nature, the study is limited by several factors. The sample is relatively small and not selected to be representative, but instead to provide rich data and insight to develop deeper understanding of the careers of Chinese expatriates. While the original aim was to recruit and interview a broad range of participants, the homogeneous characteristics (such as being relatively young, with no spouse) were clearly evident among Chinese expatriates. Future studies could take a further step to investigate the experience of early career expatriates from other countries to better understand the needs of this group of international workers. Second, this study focusses on social and individual factors influencing career mobility but did not explore organizational or international factors directly. Future studies could investigate specific organizational factors, such as organizational culture, structure and career development practices, and how these factors may impact one's career mobility. The interrelationships between the individual, social, organizational and international factors also need to be specifically examined. Third, this study focusses on

demographic characteristics of age and marital status and how they influence a person's willingness to cross boundaries. Other demographic factors such as gender and education level may also have an impact on perceived boundarylessness and could be examined in future studies. Finally, this study was based on qualitative data and did not provide quantitative evidence to test the scope of contextual and demographic factors derived from the qualitative findings. Future research could utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide further insights into the relationships between contextual/individual factors and career mobility by using diverse expatriate groups and a larger sample size to examine the extent to which boundarylessness (or boundaries) could be impacted by various factors.

References

- Altman, Y. and Baruch, Y. (2012), "Global self-initiated corporate expatriate careers: a new era in international assignments?", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 233-255.
- Andersen, S., Chen, S. and Miranda, R. (2002), "Significant others and the self", *Self and Identity*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 159-168.
- Andreasson, A. (2008), "Expatriate adjustment of spouses and expatriate managers: an integrative research review", *International Journal of Management*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 382-395.
- Arthur, M. and Rousseau, D. (1996), *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Arthur, M., Khapova, S. and Wilderom, C. (2005), "Career success in a boundaryless career world", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 177-202.
- Beaverstock, J.V. (2005), "Transnational elites in the city: British highly-skilled inter-company transferees in New York city's financial district", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 245-258.
- Biemann, T. and Andresen, M. (2010), "Self-initiated foreign expatriates versus assigned expatriates: two distinct types of international careers?", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 430-448.
- Bozionelos, N. and Wang, L. (2006), "The relationship of mentoring and network resources with career success in the Chinese organizational environment", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 17 No. 9, pp. 1531-1546.
- Bryman, A. (2001), *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Caligiuri, P. and Lazarova, M. (2001), "Strategic repatriation policies to enhance global leadership development", in Mendenhall, M., Kuhlmann, T. and Stahl, G. (Eds), *Developing Global Business Leaders*, Quorum, Westport, CT, pp. 243-256.
- Carr, S., Inkson, K. and Thorn, K. (2005), "From global careers to talent flow: reinterpreting 'brain drain'", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 40 No. 4, pp. 386-398.
- Cerdin, J. and Le Pargneux, M. (2009), "Career and international assignment fit: toward an integrative model of success", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 5-25.
- Cho, T., Hutchings, K. and Marchant, T. (2013), "Key factors influencing Korean expatriates' and spouses' perceptions of expatriation and repatriation", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 24 No. 5, pp. 1051-1075.
- Chu, Y. (2008), "The importance of being Chinese: orientalism reconfigured in the age of global modernity", *Boundary 2*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 183-206.
- Cooke, F. (2009), "A decade of transformation of HRM in China: a review of literature and suggestions for future studies", *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 47 No. 1, pp. 6-40.

-
- Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (2005), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Dickmann, M. and Harris, H. (2005), "Developing career capital for global careers: the role of international assignments", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 40 No. 4, pp. 399-408.
- Dickmann, M., Doherty, N., Mills, T. and Brewster, C. (2008), "Why do they go? Individual and corporate perspectives on the factors influencing the decision to accept an international assignment", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 731-751.
- Doherty, N. (2013), "Understanding the self-initiated expatriate: a review and directions for future research." *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 447-469.
- Doherty, N. and Dickmann, M. (2012), "Comparing and contrasting the talent and capital of self-initiated and corporate expatriates", in Hasleberger, A. and Vaiman, V. (Eds), *Managing Talent of Self-Initiated Expatriates: A Neglected Source of the Global Talent Flow*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Doherty, N. and Thorn, K. (2014), "Self-initiated expatriation through a gendered lens", in Hutchings, K. and Michailova, S. (Eds), *Research Handbook on Women in International Management*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 279-303.
- Doherty, N., Dickmann, M. and Mills, T. (2011), "Exploring the motives of company-backed and self-initiated expatriates", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 595-611.
- Doherty, N., Richardson, J. and Thorn, K. (2013), "Self-initiated expatriation and self-initiated expatriates: clarification of the research stream", *Career Development International*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 97-112.
- Fan, Y. (2000), "A classification of Chinese culture", *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 3-10.
- Fiske, S. (2004), *Social Beings: A Core Motives Approach To Social Psychology*, Wiley, New York, NY.
- Guo, C., Porschitz, E.T. and Alves, J. (2013), "Exploring career agency during self-initiated repatriation: a study of Chinese sea turtles", *Career Development International*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 34-55.
- Harris, H. and Brewster, C. (1999), "The coffee-machine system: how international selection really works", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 10 No. 3, pp. 488-500.
- Harrison, R. (2006), "From landlines to cell phones: negotiating identity positions in new career contexts.", *Journal of Employment Counseling*, Vol. 43 No. 1, pp. 18-30.
- Haslberger, A. and Brewster, C. (2009), "Capital gains: expatriate adjustment and the psychological contract in international careers", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 48 No. 3, pp. 379-397.
- Hippler, T. (2009), "Why do they go? Empirical evidence of employees' motives for seeking or accepting relocation", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp. 1381-1401.
- Hofstede, G. (2001), *Culture's Consequences*, McGraw-Hill, London.
- Inkson, K. (2006), "Protean and boundaryless careers as metaphors", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 69 No. 1, pp. 48-63.
- Inkson, K. and Arthur, M. (2001), "How to be a successful career capitalist", *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 48-61.
- Inkson, K. and King, Z. (2012), "Contested terrain in careers: a psychological contract model", *Human Relations*, Vol. 64 No. 1, pp. 37-57.

-
- Inkson, K., Gunz, H., Ganesh, S. and Roper, J. (2012), "Boundaryless careers: bringing back boundaries", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 323-340.
- King, N. (1998), "Template analysis", in Cassell, C. (Ed.), *Qualitative Methods and Analysis in Organizational Research: A Practical Guide*, Sage, London, pp. 14-36.
- King, Z., Burke, S. and Pemberton, J. (2005), "The 'bounded' career: an empirical study of human capital, career mobility and employment outcomes in a mediated labour market", *Human Relations*, Vol. 58 No. 8, pp. 981-1007.
- Kohonen, E. (2005), "Developing global leaders through international assignments: an identity construction perspective", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 22-36.
- Konopaske, R., Robie, C. and Ivancevich, J.M. (2005), "A preliminary model of spouse influence on managerial global assignment willingness", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 405-426.
- Kvale, S. (2007), *Doing Interviews*, Sage, London.
- Lau, V., Hsu, Y. and Shaffer, M. (2013), "Global careers in China", in Reis, C. and Baruch, Y. (Eds), *Careers Without Borders: Critical Perspectives*, Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 247-266.
- Lazarova, M. and Taylor, S. (2009), "Boundaryless careers, social capital, and knowledge management: implications for organizational performance", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 119-139.
- Mäkelä, L. and Suutari, V. (2011), "Coping with work-family conflicts in the global career context", *Thunderbird International Business Review*, Vol. 53 No. 3, pp. 365-375.
- Marler, J., Barringer, M. and Milkovich, G. (2002), "Boundaryless and traditional contingent employees: worlds apart", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 425-453.
- Mayrhofer, W., Meyer, M. and Steyrer, J. (2007), "Contextual issues in the study of careers", in Gunz, H. and Peiperl, M. (Eds), *Handbook of Career Studies*, Sage Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 215-240.
- Ng, T.W.H., Sorensen, K.L., Eby, L.T. and Feldman, D.C. (2007), "Determinants of job mobility: a theoretical integration and extension", *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 80 No. 3, pp. 363-386.
- Palthe, J. (2004), "The relative importance of antecedents to cross-cultural adjustment: implications for managing a global workforce", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 37-59.
- Rodrigues, R. and Guest, D. (2010), "Have careers become boundaryless?", *Human Relations*, Vol. 63 No. 8, pp. 1157-1175.
- Schmidt, C., Mansson, S. and Dolles, H. (2013), "Managing talent for global leadership positions in MNCs: responding to the challenges in China", *Asian Business & Management*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 477-496.
- Segers, J., Inceoglu, I., Vloeberghs, D., Bartram, D. and Henderickx, E. (2008), "Protean and boundaryless careers: a study on potential motivators", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 73 No. 2, pp. 212-230.
- Selmer, J. and Luring, J. (2011), "Marital status and work outcomes of self-initiated expatriates: is there a moderating effect of gender?" *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 198-213.
- Shaffer, M.A., Kraimer, M.L., Chen, Y.P. and Bolino, M.C. (2012), "Choices, challenges, and career consequences of global work experiences: a review and future agenda", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 1282-1327.
- Shen, J. (2006), "Factors affecting international staffing in Chinese multinationals (MNEs)", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 295-315.

-
- Shortland, S. and Cummins, S. (2007), "Work-life balance: expatriates reflect the international dimension", *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 28-42.
- Sluss, D. and Ashforth, B. (2007), "Relational identity and identification: defining ourselves through work relationships", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 9-32.
- Stahl, G., Miller, E. and Tung, R. (2002), "Toward the boundaryless career: a closer look at the expatriate career concept and the perceived implications of an international assignment", *Journal of World Business*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 216-227.
- Strauss, A. (1987), *Qualitative Analysis For The Social Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sullivan, S. and Arthur, M. (2006), "The evolution of the boundaryless career concept: examining physical and psychological mobility", *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Vol. 69 No. 1, pp. 19-29.
- Sullivan, S. and Baruch, Y. (2009), "Advances in career theory and research: a critical review and agenda for future exploration", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 35 No. 6, pp. 1542-1571.
- Super, D.E. (1957), *The Psychology of Careers*, Harper, New York, NY.
- Suutari, V. and Tornikoski, C. (2001), "The challenge of expatriate compensation: the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction among expatriates", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 389-404.
- Tharenou, P. (2009), "Self-initiated international careers: gender difference and career outcomes", in Baugh, S. and Sullivan, S. (Eds), *Maintaining Energy, Focus and Options Over the Career: Research in Careers*, Information Age, Charlotte, NC, pp. 197-226.
- Thorn, K. (2009), "The relative importance of motives for international self-initiated mobility", *Career Development International*, Vol. 14 No. 5, pp. 441-464.
- Thorn, K., Inkson, K. and Carr, S. (2013), "New constructs for the prediction of self-initiated international mobility: an exploratory study", *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 24-35.
- Tu, H., Forret, M. and Sullivan, S. (2006), "Careers in a non-western context: an exploratory empirical investigation of factors related to the career success of Chinese managers", *Career Development International*, Vol. 11 No. 7, pp. 580-593.
- United Nations (2013), *Demographic Yearbook 2012*, United Nations Statistics Division, New York, NY.
- Wood, E.D. and El Mansour, B. (2010), "Integrative literature review: performance interventions that assist Chinese expatriates' adjustment and performance: toward a conceptual approach", *Human Resource Development Review*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 194-218.
- Yao, C. (2014), "The impact of cultural dimensions on Chinese expatriates' career capital", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 609-630.
- Zeitz, G., Blau, G. and Fertig, J. (2009), "Boundaryless careers and institutional resources", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 372-398.

Further reading

- Dany, F., Mallon, M. and Arthur, M. (2003), "The odyssey of career and opportunity for international comparison", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 14 No. 5, pp. 705-712.
- Fish, A. and Wood, J. (1997), "Managing spouse/partner preparation and adjustment: developing a meaningful portable life", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 26 Nos 5/6, pp. 445-467.

Pang, M. (2003), "Boundaryless careers? the (in-)voluntary (re-)actions of some Chinese in Hong Kong and Britain", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 14 No. 5, pp. 809-820.

Yao, C. (2013), "The perceived value of Chinese expatriates' career capital: a symbolic capital perspective", *Journal of Global Mobility*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 187-218.

Appendix

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

Notes: ^aEurope includes, Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden; ^bother countries include, Canada, Hong Kong and South Africa

Table AI.
Summary of the sample's characteristics

Corresponding author

Dr Christian Yao can be contacted at: c.d.yao@massey.ac.nz