

The perceived value of Chinese expatriates' career capital: a symbolic capital perspective

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Abstract

Purpose - The existing expatriation literature confirms that international assignments (IAs) are an essential tool for developing international talent and global managers but relevant studies are conducted mainly in western developed contexts and neglect the effects on individuals from less developed countries such as China. This paper explores the concept of career and symbolic capital in Chinese multinational company context. It investigates the value of IAs by exploring the relationships between career capital and symbolic capital.

Design/methodology/approach - Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with Chinese expatriates were conducted.

Findings - Results suggest that the value of individual career capital from IAs depends on the contexts and how different parties perceive the value. A model comprising individual, organisational and social dimensions are proposed along with mediating factors that affect the effectiveness of value transfer between career capital and symbolic capital. Implications are rehearsed, exposing areas for further research.

Originality/value - This paper contributes to the literature by investigating the notion of career in an important but under-researched sample: Chinese expatriates. It helps to gain a better understanding on Chinese multinational companies and their employees.

Keywords Expatriates, Careers, Chinese multinational companies, Contextual view, International assignment, Symbolic capital

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Multinational companies (MNCs) routinely utilise international assignments (IAs) as part of their global coordination and control strategies (Briscoe and Schuler, 2004; Dowling *et al.*, 2009) and as an effective approach for developing managers with much-needed cross-national and cross-cultural competencies (De Cieri, 2005). Despite their importance and popularity, research indicates that there are inconsistencies between the organisation's expectation of IAs and the actual outcome (Collings *et al.*, 2007; Evans *et al.*, 2002; Shay and Baack, 2004). Adjustment difficulties (Kim and Slocum, 2008), high financial costs (Bolino, 2007) and repatriation turnover (Stahl *et al.*, 2009) are examples of expatriate failure. From an individual perspective, expatriates are motivated to accept IAs with expectations of learning new knowledge, developing managerial skills and enhancing their networks, and therefore increasing their competencies for career success (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008; Makela and Suutari, 2007). In reality, however, they face difficulties utilising these newly developed skills and often struggle to find satisfactory positions within the organisation upon return.

These issues, faced by both organisations and expatriates, suggest discrepancies between expectations and reality, and that individual career experiences from an IA are complex. To understand these issues, recent research has explored how IAs are utilised for developing individual competencies (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008; Makela and Suutari, 2007) and potentially beneficial for future career advancement. While studies suggest

changes in career competencies or career capital from IAs (Dickmann and Doherty, 2007; Dickmann and Harris, 2005), how these changes impact their career outcomes is not often clear (Jokinen, 2010). One reason for this is that IAs involve transferring existing career capital from the home country, adapting it to a new environment and learning competencies from a different cultural context. The usefulness of career capital is therefore dependent on how an IA is perceived by different parties such as expatriates and their organisations (Doherty and Dickmann, 2009). The assumption of the “perceived” value of career capital calls for a need to investigate the linkage between newly developed competencies and their perceived contextual value.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on expatriation in several ways. First, it extends the application of career capital, utilising an under-researched sample of Chinese expatriates working for MNCs in western countries. Second, it addresses an important research question often posed in the literature: Are IAs beneficial for expatriates’ careers? By investigating the perceived value of career capital, this paper aims to interpret the value of international experiences. Third, the paper utilises the construct of symbolic capital, an important yet under-developed concept in the literature, to understand the context of individual careers. While recent developments in career theories, such as boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and protean careers (Briscoe *et al.*, 2005) emphasise the personal freedom of career development, this paper offers an alternative perspective. It suggests that individuals develop their careers within the context in which they are embedded and their career options are restricted by various factors, even for highly mobile individuals such as expatriates. Taking an exploratory approach, this paper examines the career experiences of Chinese expatriates utilising the theoretical constructs of career capital and symbolic capital and attempts to understand the context of career development. Specifically, this paper aims to investigate following research questions:

- How does the career capital of Chinese expatriates change during an IA?
- What is the perceived value of these changes in career capital?

Career capital

In a “capitalistic” view of careers, an individual continually invests in their career throughout their life. As personal life unfolds, a largely unknown interplay starts between the individual and the social context in which the person is embedded (Seibert *et al.*, 2001). During personal, educational and professional development, this interplay leads to “a constantly changing, nevertheless recognisable and partly stable portfolio of capital” (Iellatchitch *et al.*, 2003, p. 734) which individuals used to achieve personal goals.

In the international career context, one way of measuring expatriates’ career development, mobility and success is to combine the behavioural and cognitive/psychological aspects of career competencies and to assess the accumulated and potential career outcomes (Jokinen, 2010). Taking this individual resource-based view, career capital (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994b; Inkson and Arthur, 2001), consists of three ways of knowing. Knowing-how competencies reflect career-relevant skills, expertise and tacit and explicit knowledge which accrue over time (Inkson and Arthur, 2001). These capabilities not only involve skills and knowledge that are needed for performance, but also consist of soft skills such as communication and people skills, and hard skills such as technical expertise. Knowing-why competencies are related to

career motivation, personal understandings and identification (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994a). They provide individuals with a sense of meaning regarding their careers and motivation to pursue career goals. Knowing-whom career competencies reflect “the attachments, relationships, reputation, sources of information and mutual obligation that people gather as they pursue their careers” (Inkson and Arthur, 2001, p. 51). Knowing-whom capital not only includes contacts within organisations such as superiors and colleagues but also contacts outside organisations. It can be either business-related contacts such as customers, competitors and suppliers, or personal social connections such as friends (Parker and Arthur, 2000). Knowing-whom capital follows the social resource theory which postulates that individuals gain advantages through accessing or using their social networks to obtain salient resources such as career advancements (Lin, 1999).

Similar to career capital theory, Jones and DeFillippi (1996) propose a model including six dimensions of career competencies: know what, know why, know when, know how, know where and know who, acknowledging the boundaryless nature of changing careers. Other scholars use theories such as intellectual and social capital examining individual career development (e.g. Haslberger and Brewster, 2009; Lazarova and Taylor, 2009). These different approaches share the same assumption that “careers are personal property” (Inkson and Arthur, 2001, p. 49) and individuals invest in accumulated learning to achieve personal goals. There are also overlaps between these approaches. For example, knowing-whom career capital acknowledges and follows the definition of social capital theory. Similarly, know what (involves understanding an industry’s opportunities, threats and requirements for career success) can be considered as part of knowing-how career capital involving skills, competencies and capabilities. Know where (entering training and advancing) and know when (timing of roles, activities and choices) can be reflected from knowing-why career capital including motives, meaning and values. Hence, this research, similar to many recent studies (e.g. Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Dickmann and Doherty, 2007; Jokinen, 2010) uses DeFillippi and Arthur’s (1994b) original definition of career capital as the framework to understand Chinese expatriates’ career experiences during IAs.

Having international experience is commonly seen as an effective way of developing one’s career capital. Expatriates go through a number of adjustment processes from IAs and each of these moves reflects the acquisition of different skills and experiences, relationships and opportunities (Cappellen and Janssens, 2005). Expatriates typically see that their foreign experience changes their competency levels and they become capable of more challenging jobs in the future (Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). They develop global mind-sets which change their understanding of their career identity and directions, and develop international networks that provide potential job opportunities and increase their career mobility (Baruch and Peiperl, 2000; Yan *et al.*, 2002). International experiences are, therefore, highly valued in the job market and considered an important tool to develop managers’ global skills which are crucial for an organisation’s international success (Cappellen and Janssens, 2010).

Some research, however, suggests a less optimistic picture of the expatriation experience. High levels of early repatriation, turnover and dissatisfaction of repatriation arrangements are some negative career outcomes (Black *et al.*, 1999; Suutari and Brewster, 2003). Some of the newly acquired knowing does not have practical value in the home context and for some, all that remains from the IA are memories (Haslberger and Brewster, 2009).

Chinese careers

Chinese careers were once characterised by life-time employment, and described as an “iron rice bowl” (tie fanwan). This has dramatically changed since the introduction of the open-door policy in the 1980s and the rapidly developing economic and social landscape of the late 1990s. A significant theme in the Chinese career literature is the impact of demographic trends on career orientation. Intergenerational career values are shifting among different generation cohorts as China responds to a different environment (Briscoe *et al.*, 2012). For example, the term “after-80 generation” (China’s Generation Y) is used to refer to those who were born between 1980 and 1989 in the urban areas of Mainland China when the one-child policy was implemented (Stanat, 2005). Compared with their parents who had experienced the cultural revolution during which economic development was stagnant and education was greatly discredited, these Generation Y people have been exposed to economic growth and intensified globalisation, significant social change and a focus upon university education (Briscoe *et al.*, 2012). Their more entrepreneurial and individualistic values orientations indicate the dramatic organisational changes in the competitive market-based economy in China (Stanat, 2005; Yu and Qu, 2007). Their definitions of career success are more diversified than older groups who value objective career achievements such as job security and have little concern for subjective success such as satisfaction, social working environments and learning opportunities (Briscoe *et al.*, 2012).

In terms of theoretical development, career outcomes and career choices are two major topics in Chinese career literature. Research is limited and mainly exploratory but attempts have been made to test the applicability of existing western theories to the Chinese context. Career outcomes have been operationalised in both objective and subjective terms with monetary income (Wong, 2005), promotion (Zhao and Zhou, 2004), job satisfaction (Loi and Ngo, 2010), social reputation, recognition and status (Lau *et al.*, 2007), all used to define career success. Career competencies and anchors (Wong, 2007) have been used to examine the development patterns of Chinese careers (Yu and Qu, 2007) and their career decision-making styles (Gati *et al.*, 2010). Among these studies, the importance of context has been repeatedly highlighted. Although the importance of contextual factors has been identified in the western literature, the uniqueness of the Chinese context adds further complexity to the arguments. Chinese elements such as guanxi (Bozionelos and Wang, 2006), organisational culture (Chen *et al.*, 2004; Wang, 2004) and political influences (Li and Walder, 2001; Wei *et al.*, 2010) are important and sometimes dominate individual career development. In a collectivist society like China, the other-referent success criteria of career are important (Heslin, 2005). Chinese workers are motivated to achieve career success with a dynamic tendency to reach externally determined goals or standards of excellence in a socially approved way (Yu, 1996).

There is no doubt these studies offer some insight into Chinese organisations and their employees, and increase understanding of the differences between the Chinese and western context. However, they provide little evidence of how Chinese expatriates develop their careers. As the growth of Chinese MNCs continues, the role of expatriates becomes more important and understanding how these Chinese elites develop their careers becomes a critical topic.

Symbolic capital

To date, much of the research investigates the acquisition of career capital from IAs (e.g. Caligiuri and Di Santo, 2001; Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008) but

the perceived value of career capital has received little emphasis. The value of career capital varies with different parties and in different contexts (Iellatchitch *et al.*, 2003). While one person may value the skills learned, another may not, and similarly, what is valued by one organisation may not be valued by another.

The assumption of the “perceived” value of career capital fits the definition of symbolic capital. Despite being introduced in the 1980s, the literature on symbolic capital is scarce. Bourdieu (1986) describes the concept of symbolic capital as “being known and recognised” (p. 37). Therefore, symbolic capital relates to perceptions, understanding and recognition of one’s reputation and value.

More specifically, in relation to individual careers, symbolic capital reflects both internal and external recognition of one’s skills, knowledge and experiences. For example, individuals develop career capital such as skills and networks which will increase their visibility helping them to gain symbolic capital such as status and power within an organisation (Iellatchitch *et al.*, 2003).

Symbolic capital can be also institutionalised, shared and valued within organisations. The creation of the value through the process depends on the degree of usefulness that is appreciated by different parties within organisations (Fuller and Tian, 2006). For example, promotion and increases in salary are organisational recognition of the value of individual symbolic capital. The symbolic capital can then be converted collectively to other forms of capital such as human and social capital, and ultimately, economic capital, to achieve organisational objectives.

Symbolic capital is also a social construct (Gergs, 2003). Its value is reflected through the process in which other forms of capital become accepted and socially recognised, based on a shared value and understanding of their usefulness. Bourdieu (1986) uses the example of paintings and artworks to demonstrate shared meaning that are interpreted in a common social setting. Artists express their ideas based on their social understanding and in the hope that the public will receive meanings in the same way. The symbolic capital is therefore reflected from the cultural value that is shared collectively by the societies. Power and reputation are both significant symbolic capital and are only valid in a social context if they are recognised and accepted by others. The process of recognition assumes a shared understanding by other actors of what constitutes value and, therefore, what is considered legitimate, valid and useful (Doherty and Dickmann, 2009). Symbolic capital is the social currency of other forms of capital and as Everett (2002) suggests “the other forms of capital are converted to symbolic capital the instant they are deemed legitimate and it is only in the form of symbolic capital that the ultimate base of power wealth can exert power and exert it durably” (p. 6).

Exploring the relationship between career capital and symbolic capital
Following Bourdieu’s (1986) work defining various forms of capital, Doherty and Dickmann (2009) argue that symbolic capital is derived from career capital. This seems to suggest that career and symbolic capital are linked and affected by the process of value creation, transfer and utilisation. At the individual level, expatriates accept IAs with an expectation of positive objective career outcomes such as promotion and a higher salary. They also perceive IAs, from a subjective perspective, as a valuable experience to increase career satisfaction, motivation and organisational commitment (Hall and Chandler, 2005). Symbolic capital, as a social construct, therefore facilitates the process of exchange and interactions between career inputs and outcomes. From an organisational perspective, individual career capital is collectively perceived

as organisational learning and management development, and is transferred in other forms such as human capital and economic capital in order to achieve organisational objectives. While these studies on symbolic capital offer some valuable insights to understanding the perceived value of career capital, how career capital is perceived as symbolic capital and more importantly, what value it has to individual career outcomes is not sufficiently clear. This study therefore takes a closer look at the process of value creation and transfer aiming to gain a better understanding of the context of developing career from an IA. Also, as most of the career theories are developed in a western context, little is known about whether they are applicable in a distinctive sample such as Chinese expatriates. Therefore, the other objective is to explore career and symbolic capital theories in a non-western context.

Method

The present study took an exploratory and interpretive approach aiming to understand expatriates' explanations and interpretations of the meaningfulness of their international experiences. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen with consideration of the richness, efficiency and focus of information, to probe underlying explanations and allow expanding and generalising theories by combining existing theoretical knowledge with new empirical insights (Yin, 1994).

Sampling

Snowball sampling was used for the exploratory nature of this research (Lofland *et al.*, 2006), considering the importance of *guanxi* (personal networks) in the Chinese context. Several studies acknowledge the difficulties of gaining access to Chinese organisations and stress the importance of using personal networks to conduct research in China (e.g. Cheng *et al.*, 2009; Cooke, 2009). As one type of non-probability sampling technique, snowball sampling is frequently used in social studies in which a high level of representation is challenging (Lofland *et al.*, 2006). Snowball sampling is also useful in situations where the members of a special population are difficult to locate, such as expatriates. Although a key limitation of snowball sampling can be a lack of representativeness, the sample obtained covered a wide range of demographic, geographic and occupational variables (Table I). Initial participants were recruited using personal networks and were then asked to help identify additional participants. The criteria for sample selection were Chinese who are currently on a company-assigned IA.

Semi-structured interviews

The interview questions were based on the Life History Template developed by Schein (1990). While the template provided general themes from the literature with a focus on the research questions, numerous open-ended questions were added to allow new themes to emerge from the interviewees' responses (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

In total, 18 face-to-face interviews were conducted with five participants in New Zealand, two in Australia and 11 in China during their short work-related visits to China. The remaining ten were conducted by telephone due to the costs and time associated with travel. The interviews, ranged in length from 40 to 65 minutes with an average of 45 minutes, and were conducted solely by the researcher and recorded with permission. Although many interviewees had a reasonable understanding of English, communication in Mandarin helped build trust and removed the problem of losing important cultural characteristics of the language.

Sample demographics	<i>n</i>	Expatriates %
<i>Number of interviews</i>	28	100
Age		
Average; SD	27.32; 1.59	
(Minimum, maximum)	(25, 32)	
Gender		
Male	21	75.0
Female	7	25.0
Marital status		
Married without children	4	14.3
In a relationship	10	25.7
Single	14	50.0
IA destination		
Australia	2	7.1
Europe (excluding UK)	6	21.4
UK	7	25.0
US	4	14.3
New Zealand	5	17.9
Others	4	14.3
Length of current IA (months)		
Average; SD	11.04; 7.79	
(Minimum, Maximum)	(2, 28)	
Previous IA experience		
Yes	15	53.6
No	13	46.4
Company classification		
Bank1	4	14.3
Bank2	2	7.1
Construction1	4	14.3
IT1	3	10.8
IT2	2	7.1
Telco1	6	21.4
Telco2	7	25.0
Job position		
Engineering	3	10.7
IT	8	28.6
Management	5	17.9
Marketing	3	10.7
Project management	4	14.2
Software development/support	5	17.9

Table I.
Interview sample
demographics

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by the researcher following the method of template analysis (King, 1998). All interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo 9. The originality of data are important for qualitative research and any manipulation has to be avoided wherever possible (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, a decision was made to maintain the transcripts in their original language, and data analysis was conducted based on these Mandarin transcripts. Translation was only done for quotation purposes. An independent translator validated the accuracy of the translation.

A list of nodes was created for coding references to knowing-how, why and whom themes. Coding was developed to explore components of each way of knowing,

reflecting interviewees' comments and informed by previous literature on the detail of the types of knowing. The NVivo software was used to search and code each interview document for the occurrence of these themes. The coding framework was refined during the process of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Nodes were then compared and merged to form categories, with each category being thoroughly analysed to identify recurrent patterns and themes. For example, contextual categories including individual, organisational and social domains emerged from the analysis. The key themes were compared and contrasted to determine any interrelationships and explanatory causes.

Findings

Career capital of Chinese expatriates

Respondents appreciated the experience of IAs and confirmed changes in all three ways of knowing. Major findings are summarised and shown in Table II.

Knowing-how. The Chinese expatriates had often been selected specifically because of skills they already had, or they were especially trained at headquarters to complete a task on expatriation. Hence, the expatriates knew the IA would be within their capabilities and had little expectation of learning new or different skills. This did not, however, restrict the development of knowing-how capabilities. Transferring skills across countries involved adjustment processes so existing skills could be tailored to the host context:

I learnt something new for the first month or so because it was a new environment. But soon after that, I was just doing the same thing again and again [Y] (female, software technician).

As the "mechanism" to implement organisational strategies, expatriates' job duties and scopes are directed by organisational practices and policies. More specifically, in Chinese MNCs, the strategies have a strong focus on maintaining control and increasing efficacy (Edwards, 2008) and hence, international assignees are often allocated with specifically defined job tasks. The adjustment process is important in the way that organisations want to maximise international assignees' outputs with minimised costs. Developing or enhancing expatriates' knowing-how is often associated with high costs and may be considered outside the strategic priorities.

Although nearly half of the participants did not feel significant changes in job-related, technical skills, they did acknowledge changes in some of the "soft" skills. One that was frequently mentioned by expatriates was the development of language. In total, 23 participants noted improvement in their English during the IA:

I never had the opportunity to practice my English in China after graduating from university. I always wanted to improve it (male, marketing).

English skills are highly valued as an important career competency in China, particularly as Chinese organisations have increased engagement with foreign counterparts. Working on IAs provided opportunities to interact with English-speaking business partners and, therefore, improve their English abilities:

At the beginning of the IA, I was hardly able to speak English in full sentences but now I am much more fluent and confident in talking to people. I also learnt to write letters/emails in English which I had not experienced before (male, IT).

In this study, despite the fact that participants often acknowledged their limited English skills prior to their departure and had the desire to improve their English, they also found language difficulties had some negative influence on their satisfaction with the IA experience. Language issues are often considered as a barrier for expatriates

Career capital	Components	Perceived changes	Illustrative quotes
Knowing-how	Language skills	Some increases	"At the beginning of the IA, I was hardly able to speak English in full sentences but now I am much more fluent and confident talking to people. I also learnt to write letters and emails in English which I had not done before" (male, IT)
	Interpersonal skills	Some but limited increases	"I think I am more comfortable dealing with clients comparing to the time when I first arrived. I don't think it is about communication skills [✓] mainly to do with daily jobs" (male, marketing)
	New ways of doing things	Very limited increases	"The working style is different here. People are more direct and it is easier to get things done. When people say yes, they mean it [✓] unlike in China that you never know what people really mean" (male, IT)
	Technical skills	No significant changes	"If I wanted to improve my technical skills, it would have been better to stay in China where most of the training takes place. Our company often ensures they send someone who has the required skill sets" (male, software development)
Knowing-whom	Networks with clients/peers at the host country subsidiary Interactions with other expatriates	Some but are temporary A major part because of shared accommodation/emotional support	"I do get to meet and know some clients through work. However, I don't think they have much use for my future careers. To me, these networks are short-termed" (male, management) "I spend most of my time with other expatriates because my company provides shared accommodation for all expatriates. They are kind of important (to me) because we are in the same situation and we understand what we are going through" (male, IT)
	Non-work related network	No increases due to the limited social interactions outside work	"I had no chance to meet new people. I spent most of the time with other international assignees, yes, it was very convenient because I did not have to worry about dealing with lots of daily things but it was no different to working in China. What is the point of working in UK when all I knew were Chinese international assignees?" (male, IT)

(continued)

Table II.
Career capital of Chinese
expatriates

Table II.

Career capital	Components	Perceived changes	Illustrative quotes
Knowing-why	Personal friendships in China	Raising concerns due to the less frequent contacts but are important for career and personal satisfaction	<p>"My contact with old friends has decreased as well, being away makes it difficult to keep in touch. I miss the old times when we would meet every week for dinner or drinks" (male, management)</p> <p>"One needs to invest in your friendships. If you put more effort and time into them, there will be returns. For example, friends can be very helpful in providing opportunities for new jobs. (In my case), being far away means I lose all these opportunities" (male, IT)</p>
	Family needs	Family needs such as looking after parents became more significant	<p>"I think the family is more important to me now. I am no longer young so I need to think about responsibilities such as looking after my parents. I think this would be the key factor when I make a decision on whether to accept another IA (male, IT)"</p> <p>"I think when you far away from home, you begin to realise the responsibilities and family needs. I think in my future, at my age, I will put more focus onto my family. They are the most important to me" (male, management)</p>
	Key guanxi at the headquarters in China	Difficult to maintain due to the long distance	<p>"We still keep in contact due to our work tasks but it's different because I don't have the chance to talk to them face-to-face, people tend to forget you and you become less important when you are absent too long" (male, management)</p>
	Self-awareness	Better understanding of personal advantages/disadvantages	<p>"It gives me an opportunity to learn more about myself. For example, I think I am an interpersonal type of person" (female, IT)</p>

(continued)

Career capital	Components	Perceived changes	Illustrative quotes
	Broaden views	Some increases but limited influences on career orientations	<p>“An old Chinese saying: You can know more by traveling thousands of miles than by reading thousands of books. The more I see the more it changes the way I think. And it has changed my views on how to look at things in the future” (male, management)</p> <p>“The international experience has broadened my views. I realise there are many different ways of doing things now” (female, IT)</p>
	Career motivation	No changes	<p>“Career plan? Hmm. I don’t have many ideas at the moment; My plan is to do what I am doing. But the future? I am not so sure yet. Just see what will happen” (male, project management)</p> <p>“I always wanted to see the world, now, I had the opportunity but I don’t think I am strong enough to make any changes” (female, IT)</p>

Table II.

when integrating to a new social environment, and the lack of social interaction may decrease individual' willingness to experience new things. The findings added further evidence concerning the importance of language competencies in the process of IA adjustment and experience.

Another knowing-how capability that was identified was cross-cultural interpersonal skills. Although expatriates did not have high expectations for the development of certain cultural skills, more than half of the participants felt that they became more comfortable in dealing with different people. They also acknowledged other learning such as general understanding of the industry and new ways of doing things. For example, several respondents expressed better working environments in the overseas subsidiaries:

I am not under the surveillance of my supervisors or managers all the time (like in China) so it is quite a relaxing working environment [Y] It is also not so competitive. It is more straightforward to deal with people here. I don' t have to worry about interpersonal relationships too much (male, marketing).

The working style is different here. People are more direct and it is easier to get things done. When people say yes, they mean it. Unlike in China that you never know what people really mean (male, IT).

Similar to their language knowing-how, these themes are considered as an adjustment because it is mainly to do with learning to suit local context. Despite respondents' appreciation on certain practices used in the host country' s subsidiaries, they didn' t consider these understandings as a valuable development for future careers:

I think it is more for the survival in the current situation. You have to learn to understand how things work here but I don' t really think it has much use for my future. For example, if I end up at another IA location, I have to start learning their ways of doing things (male, project management).

Individual perceptions seemed to be important in understanding and selecting what is relevant for career capital development. This conforms with the notion that careers are "owned" by individuals (Briscoe *et al.*, 2005; De Vos and Soens, 2008; Inkson and Arthur, 2001). In this study, respondents make sense of the IA context and determine what is the relevant knowing that is desired from an international experience.

Knowing-whom. The relevance of Chinese guanxi meant it was important for participants to maintain their connections with existing contacts. Being away, however, can increase the difficulties of maintaining key guanxi. Although respondents were often in frequent contact with staff at headquarters, including collaborating on tasks, they believed that distance had the potential to damage their networks. The importance of personal interactions in order to maintain guanxi in the Chinese culture means that absences can erode their social ties:

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

Participants made comments on their attempts to maintain their organisational guanxi during an IA:

It is important to be visible even though you are away from the 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, marketing).

Similarly, respondents identified a decrease in their personal networks. Chinese expatriates valued personal networks as an important resource for career development. Friendships with university classmates are particularly important for personal and emotional support, as well as providing career opportunities:

My contacts with old friends have decreased as well, being away makes it difficult to keep in contact. I miss the old times when we would meet every week for dinner or drinks (male, management).

One needs to invest in your friendships. If you put more effort and time into it, there will be returns, for example, friends can be very helpful in providing opportunities of new jobs. (In my case), being far away means I lose all these opportunities (male, IT).

Chinese expatriates considered that they developed little knowing-whom competencies during IAs. Their social and work networks were limited to local employees, clients and business partners, which they considered only temporary and did not anticipate a potential impact on their careers. Most of their time was spent with other expatriates from China. They found it difficult to develop Chinese style guanxi with western people. Also, because the expatriates were often housed together in the organisation's accommodation, they were not proactively involved in experiencing and learning the new culture, making it difficult to develop non-work-related social capital:

I don't really have the opportunity to get to know people outside work; I spend most of my time at the office and then the rest of the time with other expatriates. I don't really feel like making new friends. After all, the culture is different (male, engineering).

To many of them, guanxi developed from an IA are mostly functional and did not have long-term personal value. In contrast, Chinese guanxi, such as with their managers, colleagues, friends and family members have significant cultural and personal value.

Knowing-why. Major career related knowing-why included changes in characteristics, better assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and developing certain aspects of their personality (i.e. becoming more flexible, open to new things and non-judgmental in any situation):

I am more mature than before' (male, software developer) and "there is an old Chinese saying: You can know more by travelling thousands of miles than by reading thousands of books. The more I see, the more changes in my mind. And it has changed my views on how to look at things in the future (male, management).

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

Chinese assignees experienced little change in career motivation during IAs. Although more than half of the respondents said they have plans to look for opportunities outside their current organisations, this motivation was not caused by the international experience:

Even if I didn't go on this assignment, I don't think I would stay with my company for the long term (female, IT).

I never planned to be a loyal employee with my company. I am always ready for new opportunities if there are any (male, marketing).

There were no direct associations between the international experience and perceived changes in mobility. Nearly half of the respondents said they have no clear direction on the “next move” :

Career plan? Hmm [✓] I don’ t have many ideas at the moment, My plan is to do what I am doing. But the future? I am not so sure yet. I will just see what will happen (male, project management).

I always wanted to see the world, now, I have had the opportunity but I don’ t think I am strong enough to make any changes (female, IT).

After analysing respondents’ career capital changes, the focus now moves to the second research question which concerns the contextual factors of career capital. Using a similar approach to previous part, the key findings are summarised in Table III. Illustrative quotes are included to demonstrate the relevance of key topics.

Individual context

From an individual perspective, symbolic capital is determined by individual perceptions on the value of career capital development from an IA. While working in different countries provided interesting and unforgettable memories, expatriates did not consider the IA provided them with a competitive advantage over people who only have domestic experience. In their mind, IAs were “intangible” , having no obvious and substantive value for their future career progression. They understood the importance of external factors that contribute to their career success. “Many things are out of my own control” (male, IT developer) and “not of my own free will” (male, marketing manager) were typical attitudes towards their career opportunities. The reflection of a “bonded” career (as opposed to a boundaryless career) where the organisation was in control of career progression was a strong theme from the interviews. For example, some of the newly developed “knowing” may be culture-specific and may not be relevant in the home country, or the home organisation may not have tasks for expatriates to utilise their new skills.

Several respondents indicated that they became more realistic about expectations from the international experience:

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

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

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

The unique family structure and its cultural significance to Chinese meant international assignees’ career capital development was shaped by factors such as family responsibilities, findings pointed to their influences on knowing-how capital. Examples of comments were:

My family is really important to me that’ s why I don’ t want to accept another IA after this one (male, IT).

Context	Components	Perceived influences (symbolic capital)	Illustrative quotes
Individual	Economic value of IA experience	Its significance decrease as other factors become more important	“I accepted this IA because of the high salary, I thought I can save money to buy an apartment in Beijing but I don’ t really care about it anymore, I would rather get less money but stay with my family. Besides, with the current real estate climate (in Beijing), I will never save fast enough to buy an apartment” (female, IT)
	Family needs	More relevant to expatriates due to the distance with family members. Social needs to look after parents due to the one-child family structure	“I think how other people think about me is quite important. I know it is quite shallow [Y] but you can’ t take yourself out of the society. And I want to make my family proud” (male, IT)
	Perceived knowing-how (e.g. language, technical skills)	Limited personal uses	“I haven’ t planned to stay here for too long. In my opinion, the skills I develop here may have very limit use in China” (male, marketing)
	Chinese identity	Being away strengthened their cultural identity and the desire to go back to China	“It (Australia) is good, but it is not my home [Y] (before I came to Australia), I thought I would enjoy settling in a foreign country, but now, I want to go back to China. It is not bad to be a Chinese” (male, marketing). “You will always feel like a foreigner, no matter how long you live here (the US). There is something powerful pulling me back to China. My family, my friends and everything I know are there” (female, IT)
<i>(continued)</i>			

Table III.
Context of career capital

Table III.

Context	Components	Perceived influences (symbolic capital)	Illustrative quotes
Organisational	Expatriate management practices	Organisational motives: skill-match instead of training purpose The importance of efficiency	<p>“There are many policies you have to follow and as a result, it is difficult to decide what you want to learn from an IA. There are much more powerful influences over my own desires” (male, IT)</p> <p>“They (the company) will tell you what you need to learn. It is really dependent on the organisation’s needs” (male, project management)</p>
	Repatriation	Difficulties to find a satisfactory position based on IA experience	<p>“In terms of skills, when you go out (on an IA), even after three years, the skills you accumulate may not be as valuable as those if you had worked in China for those three years. HQ people don’t know how practical and relevant your overseas experiences are in China” (male, management)</p>
	Organisational culture	The importance of control Bureaucratic hierarchy	<p>“Although X Ltd is an private-owned multinational company, it is still very much like a SOE. There are lots of unwritten rules. You know, you have to follow them to survive. Also, these rules might not allow you to develop certain skills” (female, IT)</p> <p>“There are still many ‘grey’ areas of Chinese organisational culture in my company. It (career development within an organisation) is not a fair competition. Sometimes you need to make compromises; sometimes you need to use unconventional channels to get what you want” (male, management)</p>

(continued)

Context	Components	Perceived influences (symbolic capital)	Illustrative quotes
Social context	Cultural differences	Chinese culture plays an dominant role in shaping career values	“I don’ t want other people to think I am an irresponsible son. China is different (to the West), the warfare system is still not adequate and I need to make sure look after my parents when they need me” (male, management)
	Job market conditions	Highly competitive job market means IA experience may have limited contribution to individual competitive advantage	“I haven’ t tried, so I don’ t know how competitive I will be. But in my mind, I don’ t think I have any absolute advantages. In fact, I think employers may want someone who has local skills. So if that’ s the case, I will not make a big fuss of my international experiences on my CV. I will concentrate on what I have done in China instead” (male, marketing)
		The importance of China-related skills, e.g. understanding of guanxi	“Guanxi within the company is very, very important. It can determine whether you will get a good position or not (after the return). Particularly when there are so many repatriates who have similar experiences and skills, guanxi can make a difference” (male, IT)

Table III.

It definitely makes me re-think my future plan (about my career). These are the family responsibilities that I can not deny so I have to think about them together with my career direction (male, marketing).

Unlike their western counterparts whose family concerns are often related to their spouse and children (e.g. Andreason, 2008), the participants' comments on family responsibilities were generally related to the needs of their parents. As discussed in the earlier section, most of the participants are between 20 and 35 and unmarried, as well as without children so this could be the factor explaining the difference. Furthermore, due to the "one child policy" and the fundamental unit of family in the Chinese culture (Luo, 2008), Chinese assignees faced pressure to put more emphasis on looking after their parents. Numerous respondents have stressed this. For example:

My parents are getting older (in their 50s), so I need to make sure to be close to them. Being far away for too long is not a good option for me (male, IT).

It doesn't mean I cannot develop my career (in China), it just means I need to adjust my direction. I think it's ok. Although my parents didn't ask me to return to China but I know they want me to, so I will move my focus to China (male, marketing).

These responsibilities were also reflected on a social dimension. "Filial piety", as an essential part of Confucianism (McNaughton, 1974), is the important virtue and primary duty of respect, obedience and care for one's parents and elderly family members:

I don't want other people to think that I am an irresponsible son. China is different (to the West). The welfare system is still not adequate and I need to make sure look after my parents when they need me (male, management).

The social interpretation of one's role and how well he/she performs in the role significantly impact on one's knowing how and perceived career success:

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 needs even if I get good money, a good job and a good future, I won't be happy (male, IT).

Some comments pointed to other family and social responsibilities such as "raising a family" :

My parents often give me pressure. They say other children my age have married, so I need to do the same thing. So they don't want me to be outside (China) for too long (male, IT).

Expatriates also commented on the limited practical value of their language skills when they return to headquarters:

When I go back to China, I do not think I will get a lot of use from my English skills because Mandarin will be the only language that is required within the organisation (male, IT).

In their minds, English skills are "nice to have" instead of an "essential requirement" for career progression. Their understanding, in the Chinese context, was that career progressions are dependent on the overall value of career capital instead of each individual component of knowing. Having improved English skills would not overcome the need to obtain other essential career factors such as knowing-why and knowing-whom capital.

In fact, similar to their language skills, expatriates perceived little practical value from the skills and contacts acquired from IAs:

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

I don't really want to know more people (during the IA), even if I do, I don't think they are very helpful for my future career. When I go back to China, they don't really have much value (female, IT).

A desire to belong back in China around familiar surroundings dominated the cultural belongingness category. Being away from home intensified their cultural identity and the need to return. More than half of the respondents affirmed that the international experiences have strengthened their cultural identity and the desire to go back to China:

From my personal point of view, I haven't planned to stay abroad too long. I want to go back to China to develop my future so it means the longer I stay, the more difficult it would be for me to get back on track. You see, you need contacts for everything (in China), but after staying on an IA for two years, I would lose all my Chinese contacts including business partners and friends. I will have to start from nothing (male, management).

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

The need to develop more contextually oriented career capital was important for their career development. They acknowledged the cultural differences between China and the west and understood that many of the skills developed on the IA would not function effectively in the Chinese context.

Organisational context

MNCs utilise employees' career capital to achieve organisational goals. As previously discussed, organisations facilitate the process of conversion from career capital to other forms of capital such as human capital, social capital and ultimately, economic capital. The effectiveness of the capital conversion depends on how organisations perceive and utilise the individual career capital gained from IAs. Therefore, in the organisational context, the relationship between career capital and symbolic capital is influenced by various organisational factors. This study reported these factors.

Expatriate management practices. The organisational utilisation of expatriates' career capital was reflected in their expatriate management practices. First, the selection process was primarily driven by the technical requirements of an IA. Respondents considered that the goal of selection was to effectively identify IA needs and allocate candidates with the required skill sets. The process focused on "skill match" instead of focusing on finding candidates with the soft skills (e.g. communication, flexibility and autonomy) who could potentially be trained to do such a job. There was often no specific IA preparation programmes prior to expatriation although some MNCs did provide information on the host destinations on their corporate web sites:

Using my company as an example, every second there is someone (expatriate) flying (to an IA destination), it is impossible to train everyone before they go. That would create huge hassles for the company (male, IT).

Efficiency was a major requirement among Chinese MNCs and in order to achieve this, companies had to eliminate time consuming processes such as adjustment or cultural training. Therefore, Chinese MNCs often rely on individuals themselves to adjust to the new environment. During IAs, unlike their western counterparts, Chinese MNCs were often provided with free (shared) accommodation and meals. Expatriates, therefore, spent most of their time with fellow expatriates. This practice aimed to provide a

familiar cultural environment so expatriates could adapt to the new environment quickly. However, some expatriates voiced the disadvantages of such an arrangement:

I had no chance to meet new people. I spent most of the time with other expatriates, yes, it was very convenient because I did not have to worry about dealing with lots of daily things but it was no different to working in China. What is the point of working in UK when all I knew were Chinese expatriates? (male, IT).

MNCs did not aim to assist expatriates to merge into the new cultural environment. Instead, they created a temporary cultural safety net so expatriates would not experience cultural difficulties. Respondents believed that the Chinese companies did not expect expatriates to develop new cultural skills from IAs.

Further, Chinese MNCs did not encourage expatriates to take their partners or children on the IA, despite having policies offering some support such as free-shared accommodation. They generally considered providing support for families as an unnecessary expense and therefore tended to have practices that aimed to eliminate this problem. The use of short-term (often less than six months) IAs or sending single expatriates onto longer term assignments immediately simplified the situation for these MNCs.

Repatriation. Respondents also confirmed dissatisfaction at the proposed arrangements their organisations made for their return. There was clear evidence that the organisations neither expected the expatriate to obtain new career capital from IAs nor considered international experiences an important part of career capital:

Our company does not have any clear policies regarding repatriation positions. That's the aspect I am very disappointed about. In my case, I decided to go back to get married so have to return earlier, but my company wants me to stay here longer and there might not be a position when I return (male, IT).

I would be lucky if I got my old position back, most of the colleagues I know left their companies (after return) because they were not happy about the new job arrangements (male, Marketing).

This, from another perspective, reflects organisational views on symbolic capital that there is limited organisational usefulness of individual career capital.

Organisational culture. Further, the uniqueness of Chinese organisational culture surfaced from the data. Although Chinese MNCs compete in a global environment using contemporary western practices, aspects of Chinese organisational characteristics still remain. Many Chinese MNCs receive support from the government but must, as a consequence, accept a political agenda and central control. Expatriates were used in implementing instructions from headquarters to maintain control. The strategic focus of control overtook the need to train and develop expatriates.

There were also other typical Chinese organisational cultural factors mediating the value of individual career capital within the organisational context. Due to cultural, developmental and political needs, Chinese organisations typically have a more formal and multi-layered organisational hierarchy compared to western organisations (Zhao and Zhou, 2004). This tendency is compounded by the size of these Chinese MNCs where a sharp hierarchical structure is seen as necessary to ensure control and management.

Organisational needs are more important than individual needs such as learning and therefore their experience on the development of knowing-how was predominately guided by organisational practices. Examples of comments were:

There are many policies you have to follow and as a result, it is difficult to decide what you want to learn from an IA. There are much more powerful influences over my own desires (male, IT).

They (the company) will tell you what you need to learn. It is really dependent on the organisation's needs (male, project management).

Some participants also commented on the difficulties to demonstrate their skills within the organisational context. Rather than general career development, the focus was on the completion of tasks in the immediate role:

There is always someone better than you. For example, there are about 100 people doing the same thing as I do so I need to make sure I do my job properly. I know it is important to think about my future career but I don't really have the time to do it now. I just do my job at the moment (female, IT).

You know, you will not necessarily get promoted because of the international assignment or the skills you develop from it. In order to shine in such a big company, it is important to know your role in the company. I am just an insignificant person in the company so I don't think I want to put too much effort just to improve my skills. That doesn't help me, in my opinion (male, technician).

These perceptions were developed prior to the IAs and the international experiences have had no effect in changing their understanding of the hierarchy. One example to demonstrate this is:

Before that (IA), I already knew the big picture so I didn't have too high an expectation (of the IA). The more you expect, the more disappointed you may get, so it's better to be realistic. Besides, it is a great opportunity to come out and so what's more that I need to demand (male, marketing).

Again, however, being away for too long intensified their desire to go back to headquarters:

My future plan is in China so I am a bit worried about losing grasp of key organisational factors by being away for too long (male, management).

Lastly, participants' comments did not directly address the relationships between bureaucratic hierarchy and knowing-whom. One explanation may be that Chinese international assignees are comfortable with the hierarchy as they accept specific Chinese cultural elements such as high power distance, which impacts on the organisational culture and structures.

Overall, the usefulness of career capital within an organisation was affected by numerous organisational factors. These factors determined strategic priorities for organisations and outlined the value of individual career capital or symbolic capital. Expatriates worked and developed their careers within the organisational context and how their career capital contributed to their career goals was highly dependent on organisational management and practices.

Social context

The cross-cultural nature of IAs means that expatriates transfer their career capital across different social/cultural contexts. The process of transfer challenged and defined the usefulness of career capital in the new environment. Further, as many expatriates struggled to find satisfactory positions within their organisations and had a tendency to find new jobs upon return, the value of their newly acquired career capital was exposed to evaluation by potential employees and wider society. The research data highlighted several components.

Cultural differences: the Chinese way. IAs provided the experience of learning about new cultures, to compare them with the Chinese culture and to determine which is more important to them. Expatriates had the opportunity to see different ways of doing things. Although many expatriates acknowledged and expressed a preference for some components of Western culture such as life style, interpersonal relationships and work ethics, they also articulated the dominant role of Chinese culture and how it shaped their career values. In the Chinese context, career development is not a simple matter of accumulating career capital, but a more complex process of tailoring that career capital in the Chinese way:

In China, people spent a significant proportion of their time and energy on non-work related *guanxi* because they are important for Chinese careers. In comparison, it is much simpler in the West, I just need to do my job well (during IAs) (male, IT).

The dominant roles of Chinese culture were also reflected from the reverse cultural shock received by expatriates who had prior IA experience.

When I finished my first IA and went back (to China), I found it hard to adjust, the constant traffic, air pollution and life was stressful, but after a while, I switched back to the Chinese mode and then I didn't feel anything (different) (male, marketing).

The acceptance and adaptation to Chinese culture provided expatriates with guidelines to evaluate their career capital and competitiveness in society. The career capital which was highly valued by society would soon show its benefits and that which was not considered as important would soon fade out and lose its value.

Job market conditions. The job market in China is extremely competitive, particularly for those highly desired positions in Chinese MNCs because of higher pay and better job security. However, overseas experiences might not be unique or offer any competitive advantage. Many interviewees expressed uncertainty about the impact of IAs on their new employment opportunities. Although international experiences would add value if the new position involved international business, Chinese-specific skills such as dealing with *guanxi* and the familiarity with the local context, are more desirable assets to employers. In fact, many expatriates did not think they had any particular advantages when competing with local workers:

IAs may sound prestigious, but it might not have any practical meaning to new employers. For example, employers would be more interested in people who have more local experience because they have accumulated *guanxi* resources, instead of expatriates like myself who have been away for two years and have lost existing contacts (male, management).

Therefore, expatriates were very realistic about their international experiences and cautious about career moves despite dissatisfaction with job arrangements when returning to China. Within a big organisation, the role of an individual is insignificant and can be easily replaced by others. Expatriates understood the limit of their career capital development from IAs and what it can contribute to their career success. In this regard, the relationship between individual career capital and symbolic capital were evaluated by the social context and bounded by external factors such as how competitive the job market is. For example, in a job market where skilled workers are in short supply, expatriates' international experiences may be more appealing to potential employers even the job task is not directly related to IAs. In contrast, expatriates' newly acquired career capital may not increase their employability if there is a large talent pool of people.

Discussion

This study was exploratory aiming to understand the perceived value of career capital from IAs. It was based on the conceptual definitions of career capital and symbolic capital to analyse the perceived value of international working experiences.

According to Doherty and Dickmann (2009) and Dickmann and Doherty (2007), perceptions of symbolic capital are based on the context in which they are experienced. They proposed a model of objective and subjective recognition of symbolic capital and how career capital is perceived by both individuals and their organisations. Based on the issues raised by the current study and with the consideration of the unique nature of IAs, the social dimension has been added to the individual and organisational dimensions.

Figure 1 builds a dimensional model of the career capital gained from IAs and how its value is transferred through different contexts.

The model outlines the process of value creation from IAs as a process of recognition of career capital. Iellatchitch *et al.* (2003) suggest that the process of recognition of the symbolic capital of careers is fundamental to the usefulness of career capital in economic terms. If career capital is likened to a nation's "currency", symbolic capital would be the economic value of the currency. The currency is only valid (e.g. having its usefulness to purchase products) if its economic value is recognised collectively or if the currency is valid in the specific country. The currency is simply a piece of paper if it is not perceived as valuable in the context. Similarly, the newly acquired three ways of knowing become valid in this context when career capital is recognised as useful by different parties. While it is necessary to develop career capital from an IA, it is more important to ensure these developments can fit into a future career context. In order to gain a return from these career capital "investments", expatriates need to minimise the loss through the process of value creation and transfer. For example, a Chinese expatriate may be motivated to develop more China-related knowing-how if he/she considers their future being in China. If an expatriate is considering moving to other companies, he/she might have to put more

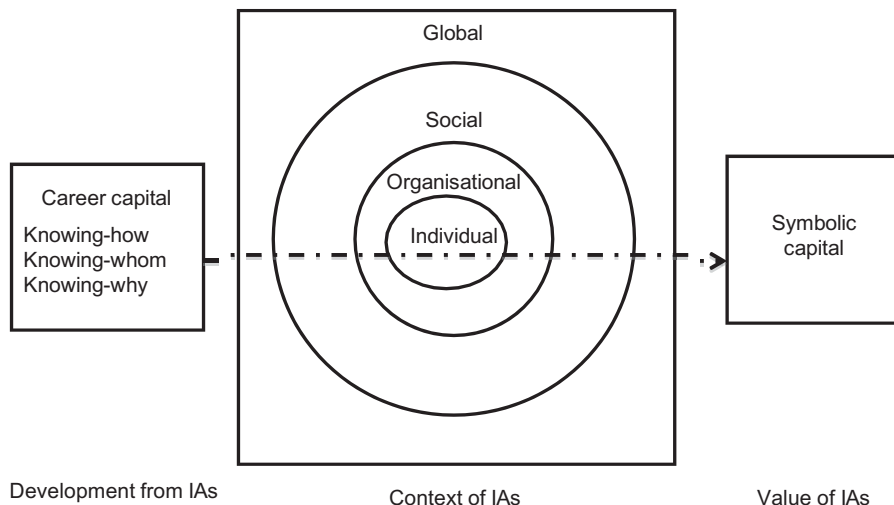


Figure 1.
The process of value
creation and transfer
from an IA

emphasis in ensuring acquired career capital is transferrable to a new organisational context.

Further, the study confirmed a list of contextual factors emphasising their influencing roles in the relationships between career capital and symbolic capital. In their study, Doherty and Dickmann (2009) argue the impacts of organisational context such as management expectations, the repatriation process and organisational career planning on development of symbolic capital from IAs. The current study also found organisational strategies such as expatriation and repatriation practices have a direct impact on the usefulness of expatriates' career capital (in symbolic terms). These organisational practices are directly linked to organisational strategies which define organisational priorities and expectations from the IAs (Welch *et al.*, 2009). In addition, this study found that Chinese organisational culture plays an important role in influencing career capital development. This is due to the unique structure and characteristics of Chinese MNCs and their distinctive organisational cultures associated with political and social influences. Organisational culture provides organisational rules to guide interpersonal relationships and management practices (Zheng and Lamond, 2009). It is therefore an important contextual factor when considering the usefulness of career capital. The study found similar conclusions to Doherty and Dickmann's (2009) study that distinct organisational contexts have impacts on the development of symbolic capital for IAs.

This study also found another dimension named the social context which has an important role in linking career and symbolic capital. In this regard, career capital is exposed to evaluation in the social context where the usefulness of career capital is determined by the shared cultural and practical values. As a social construct, the symbolic capital of IAs is then transferred to other forms of capital, shaping one's social identity, status and satisfaction. As many expatriates may face challenges finding alternative employment opportunities upon return due to their perceived job dissatisfaction within the organisation after repatriation, it is important to understand how international experience impacts on individual career options such as opportunities and employability in a wider social context. This study offered a first insight into this dimension and argues that symbolic forms of individual career capital are represented as social constructs. For example, the value of IAs is evaluated according to its relevance and significance in a specific social and cultural context. Some studies found that IAs increase expatriates' social reputation and status so their long-term employment possibilities are enhanced; however, the present study found, in the Chinese context, that the social usefulness of career capital is limited due to cultural differences and employment market competitiveness in China.

Also, other social/cultural factors such as family based collectivism and the importance of *guanxi*, limited the value of career capital from IAs. Being away from key contacts and family members has a significant negative effect on expatriates' careers when they return to China. The social need to define one's identity and the relationship with others dominate one's career opportunity. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the value of career capital is only valid, in the social context, if it is in line with the social expectations and fits into individual cultural roles/identities.

It is necessary to acknowledge that it is not the intension of this study to exclude other relevant contextual factors. For example, both political and economic factors, two significant features of China (Bjorkman *et al.*, 2008; Cooke, 2008; Keister and Zhang, 2009; McNally, 2008; Yang and Stoltenberg, 2008) are not explored in this study.

While both factors are considered as highly relevant in influencing organisational practices and individual behaviours, participants' comments have not directly pointed to these areas. One explanation could be that, the uniqueness of Chinese political influences, which generates high interest in the west, is a common phenomenon to Chinese who work and live in the Chinese political environment. Hence, they might not consider the governmental influences as a specific factor.

Second, Chinese are hesitant to criticise the government in public although there has been increasing public demand for freedom of speech and democracy in recent years. Participants might view providing personal views on the government, particularly negative comments, as unnecessary. Compared to dominant influences from the government, individual opinions seemed to be insignificant. The fact that the interviews were recorded added more sensitivity to their intensions on conversational topics.

Furthermore, contextual factors are integrated so participants' comments on political factors can be reflected from other factors such as social characteristics. For example, family based collectivism is not only a social issue; it is reflected from the political aspect. It is legislated by the government that adult children have both moral and legal duties in looking after their elderly parents. This social need is a reflection of the political agenda that is promoted by the government.

Overall, it becomes clear that simply focusing on one single aspect (e.g. individual development of career capital) or neglecting the interdependencies between these contextual factors may result in significant negative impact on one's career. The findings point to the notion of protean career adding arguments to "whether individuals own their careers" (Briscoe and Hall, 2006; De Vos and Soens, 2008; Hall and Moss, 1998; Qin and Baruch, 2010). While an individual may have more freedom to make career decisions, their career choices are strongly shaped by the context in which they are in and their perceptions on the outcomes of career decisions. These contextual factors are particularly significant for individuals such as international assignees who move across different contexts including individual, organisational and social domains. For them, the challenges are not only on developing essential career capital to enable effective job performance during an IA, but also to ensure finding their own "context" for long-term career development and developing relevant knowing.

Conclusion

Overall, this study drew on the notion of career and symbolic capital to investigate the usefulness and value of IAs. It goes beyond the current static focus in research on IAs to include multi-dimensional perspectives on the perceived outcomes of IAs. In doing so, it has made several contributions. First, it proposed a framework for further research on the utility of symbolic capital to further understand the impact of IAs and expatriates' career development. Based on previous studies, this paper added a further social dimension arguing that the relationship between expatriates' career and symbolic capital are influenced by three levels of context: individual, organisational and social. The study offers a multi-dimensional view on expatriates' career development. Future studies can provide closer investigation on how these dimensions impact with each other to form the context of career development. It added to the current, rather unilateral, understanding of career models.

More specifically, the paper outlined a set of contextual factors influencing the transferability between career capital and symbolic capital. These factors serve as

an important foundation in understanding the complexity of IA contexts. Some factors such as the job difficulty of repatriation, organisational support and cultural differences are acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Starr, 2009; Van Der Heijden and Paauwe, 2009; Van Vianen *et al.*, 2004), but other factors such as organisational culture and home country job markets are relatively new. While some may be limited to the Chinese context, future studies can explore their relevance in other cultural samples or any other important factors to be considered to enhance the understanding on the theoretical applicability across different cultural contexts.

This study also offers some implications for management and MNCs. It emphasises the importance of meeting individual expectations in order to improve individual satisfaction and IA effectiveness. While MNCs use career benefits (such as the development of career capital from IAs) to attract and motivate employees to accept IAs, MNCs often have limited support to facilitate the transfer of new skills and knowledge. This study suggests MNCs need to provide adequate practices so the value of career capital (or symbolic capital) will be appreciated by individuals, organisations and wider society. Furthermore, some Chinese organisational practices such as the use of short-term assignments and offering shared-accommodation/living arrangements may offer new alternatives to improve the effectiveness with adjustment and personal satisfaction. Also, some of the findings offer implications for Chinese organisations. Chinese MNCs are relatively young and inexperienced at international level. It would be useful to utilise expatriates as learning mechanisms more actively to improve their abilities in internationalisation.

Due to its exploratory nature, the study is limited by several factors. The sample was relatively small and not selected to be representative, but instead to provide rich data and insight to understand IA experiences. As acknowledged in other studies (e.g. Cooke, 2009; Fang, 2011; Williamson and Zeng, 2009; Zheng and Lamond, 2009), it is rather difficult to conduct research in Chinese MNCs and it has proved to be a challenging task in opening up conversations with participants to learn sensitive issues such as their future career directions, perceptions on organisational practices and evaluation of international experiences. The difficulties are intensified by the limited time and cost available to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants in more than six countries. While the use of both face-to-face and telephone interviews with a small size sample may limit the applicability of findings, as one of the first of its kind, this study moves towards a better understanding of Chinese international assignees. As noted in other studies with similar sample sizes (e.g. Altman and Baruch, 2012; Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Mohr and Klein, 2004), a combined approach of face-to-face and telephone interviews is an effective approach to open up avenues for gaining new knowledge. Also, this study satisfies Strauss' s (1987) saturation criterion for qualitative data accumulation.

The limited demographical characteristics such as industry, age, IA experience and occupation of the sample may also restrict the applicability of findings. For example, participants are relatively young and without spouse. Further studies can investigate if differences in generations and family structure have influences on individual perceptions. The study includes both expatriates with no previous IA experience and those who have previous experience. While the findings did not suggest significant differences between these two groups, it might be due to the small sample of this exploratory paper. Further studies can examine if there are (or not) any differences

between experiences and novel expatriates. It would be also useful to do comparative studies between (experienced and novel) expatriates from the west with Chinese (experienced and novel) expatriates to see if experienced expatriates from both cultures share a similar perception and if cultural elements have any influences over their international experiences. The technical nature (e.g. IT, marketing) of participants' jobs in this study may limit the implication of findings. Although across sample comparisons between participants who have managerial roles with those with more defined, technical positions found no significant difference in career perceptions, the sample is too small to make such a conclusion. Further, other types of MNCs such as mining companies would be useful to add further insights to understanding organisational influences on individual perceptions on career capital.

The use of a semi-structured interview method relied on expatriates' self-reports of their careers and organisational practices and further studies can implement multi-method strategies or select various stakeholders (e.g. HR managers, senior management) to gain different perspectives on issues. Lastly, the study is limited to Chinese MNCs and whether findings can be applied to other contexts need to be tested. Further work on transnational companies from emerging economies is important in gaining fuller understanding of theories and developing global or universal frameworks.

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