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Self-initiated expatriate careers as resources, fit and actions

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Julkaisun nimike Omaehtoiset kansainväliset urat resurssi-, yhteensopivuus- ja toimintonäkökulmasta		
Tiivistelmä <p>Omaehtoista kansainvälistä uraliikkuvuutta on perinteisesti tutkittu länsimaalaisissa, kehittyneiden yhteiskuntien urakonteksteissa. Sen sijaan uratutkimus kehittyvissä maissa kuten Kiinassa, on jäänyt vähemmälle huomiolle. Tämän 47 haastatteluun perustuvan laadullisen väitöskirjan tarkoituksena on tarkastella länsimaalaisten työntekijöiden omaehtoisia työuria Kiinassa sekä työnantajien että työntekijöiden näkökulmasta. Samalla tämän väitöskirjan tulokset lisäävät ymmärrystämme omaehtoisista kansainvälisistä työurista, sekä urakokemuksiin liittyvistä haasteista ja mahdollisuuksista. Väitöskirjan tulosten perusteella omaehtoiset työurat voivat olla haasteellisia. Haasteet kumpuavat puutteellisesta kielitaidosta, vaikeudesta sopeutua paikalliseen kulttuuriin sekä ulkomaalaisille omaehtoisille työntekijöille tyypillisistä lyhytkestoisista työsuhteista. Lyhyet ja väliaikaisiksi mielletyt työsuhteet eivät välttämättä luo mahdollisuuksia ammatilliseen oppimiseen tai urakehittymiseen, eivätkä siten myöskään kohenna työnsaantimahdollisuuksia kotimaahan palatessa.</p> <p>Myös työnantajat voivat kokea omaehtoisten uraliikkujien palkkaamisen ja heihin panostamisen ongelmallisena. Työnantajien mukaan työntekijöillä ei välttämättä ole riittävästi työympäristön vaatimaa osaamista ja työsuhteet jäävät siten usein lyhyiksi. Toisaalta tulokset osoittavat, kuinka kehittyvissä urakonteksteissa voi löytyä työtehtäviä esimerkiksi sellaisilla aloilla, jotka globalisaation myötä ovat siirtyneet länsimaista Aasiaan. Tulosten mukaan toimialojen nopea muutos ja ala- tai maantieteellinen osaaminen voivat aiheuttaa haasteita, kuten esimerkiksi vaikeuden palata kotimaahan sopivien työtehtävien puuttuessa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen mukaan kaikki omaehtoiset kansainväliset uraliikkujat eivät pyri edistämään työuriaan yhtä itseohjautuvasti, kuin aikaisemman kirjallisuuden perusteella voisi olettaa. Sen sijaan tavat tai valittu toimintamalli, ovat riippuvaisia motivaatio- ja urakehitysodotuksista, joita yksilöllä on kansainväliselle omaehtoiselle työsuhteelle.</p>		
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Abstract <p>Research on SIEs has focused on the careers of westerners in western career contexts. However, developing country career contexts such as China have recently provided a growing number of career opportunities for mobile SIEs, but China is an understudied research context. This dissertation sheds light on the careers of SIEs, and how they perceive both the challenges and opportunities that come with their international career experiences.</p> <p>The current dissertation is based on qualitative findings and aims to shed light on the careers of western SIEs in China from the resource, fit and action perspectives. At the same time, the dissertation provides views on SIE careers from both the employee and employer perspectives. The findings are based on the subjective perceptions and experiences of 47 individuals as they relate to western SIE careers in China.</p> <p>The findings of the dissertation illustrate how the careers of SIEs, particularly in cross-cultural career contexts that deviate from western ones, like local organisations in China, may be challenging for the western SIEs. These challenges not only stem from the lack of language skills or cultural understanding, but also from the temporary character of SIE careers. SIE careers, which are typically perceived as short-term and temporary, may not provide grounds for competence and career development, and thus increase employability upon repatriation. SIEs without a long-term focus and contextual competencies do not seem to be considered as a staffing group worthy of recruiting by international employers in China. On the other hand, local organisations in China may provide interesting career opportunities for those who have suffered from the 'Asianisation' of industries. Acquiring strongly context-specific competences may however lead to other kinds of challenges, such as perceptions of being trapped and difficulties with repatriation, due to the lack of suitable career opportunities at home. Owing to these challenges connected to SIE careers, individuals could be expected to actively self-manage their careers. According to the findings, however, the type of career self-management behaviour or strategy applied is dependent on motivation and career outcome expectations, which may be accommodated to match the requirements of an individual and the context.</p>		
Keywords Self-initiated expatriates, careers, China		

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	VII
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Objectives of the dissertation	5
1.3 Intended contributions	7
1.4 Structure of the dissertation	8
2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
2.1 Self-initiated expatriation.....	9
2.2 Careers as resources	10
2.2.1 Concept of perceived employability.....	11
2.2.2 Development of perceived employability from the conservation of resources theory perspective	12
2.2.3 Self-initiated expatriate careers in terms of resources	13
2.3 Careers as fit	14
2.3.1 Person to environment fit theory	15
2.3.2 Fit as a tool	16
2.3.3 Dynamic nature of fit	17
2.3.4 Self-initiated expatriate careers in terms of fit	17
2.4 Careers as actions	18
2.4.1 Career self-management	18
2.4.2 King's framework of career self-management behaviour.....	19
2.4.3 Outcomes of career self-management	20
2.4.4 Self-initiated expatriate careers in terms of actions	20
2.5 Careers in context: China	21
2.5.1 Economic and technological development	22
2.5.2 Labour market demand and supply development	22
2.5.3 China as a cross-cultural career context for Westerners	23
3 METHODS.....	26
3.1 Epistemological and ontological considerations	26
3.2 Research strategy	27
3.3 Research process.....	29
3.3.1 Informant selection	29
3.3.2 Data collection	29
3.3.3 Data analysis.....	32
3.4 Research quality	33
4 OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS.....	38
4.1 Careers as resources: ' <i>Perceived Employability Development of Western Self-Initiated Expatriates in China</i> '	38

4.2	Careers as fit: <i>'Employer Perceptions of Self-Initiated Expatriate Employability in China: A Person-Environment Fit Perspective'</i>	39
4.3	Careers as actions: <i>'Career Self-Management Behaviour of Western Self-Initiated Expatriates in Local Organisations in China'</i>	40
5	DISCUSSION	41
5.1	Contributions of the dissertation	44
5.1.1	Theoretical contributions	44
5.1.2	Practical implications	46
5.2	Limitations and directions for future research.....	49
	REFERENCES	52

Figures

Figure 1.	Theoretical perspectives that underpin the dissertation.....	4
Figure 2.	Four hypothetical examples of PE development trajectories: stable high, increasing, decreasing and variant	13

Tables

Table 1.	Summary of the research objectives, sample, data collection period and theoretical grounding.....	6
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Articles

This dissertation is based on three appended articles that are:

[1] Makkonen, P. (2015). Perceived Employability Development of Western Self-Initiated Expatriates in Local Organisations in China. *Journal of Global Mobility*, 3(4), 350-377.¹

An earlier version of this paper has been presented at ANZAM2013, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, December 3-7, 2013.

[2] Makkonen, P. (2015). Employer Perceptions of Self-initiated Expatriate Employability in China: A Person-to-Environment Fit Perspective. *Journal of Global Mobility*, 3(3), 303-330.²

An earlier version of this paper has been presented at Human Capital International Conference 2014, Chongqing, China, December 12-15, 2014

[3] Makkonen, P. (2015). Career Self-Management Behaviour of Western Self-Initiated Expatriates in Local Organizations in China. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, published online, DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2015.1061580.³

An earlier version of this paper has been presented at International IHRM Conference, Cracow, Poland, June 24-27, 2014.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Our careers – ‘the evolving sequence[s] of [our] work experience over time’ (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence 1989:8) - are likely to be ‘one of the most important features of [our] lives’ (Inkson, Dries & Arnold 2015: 11). It is therefore no wonder, if ‘most people want to believe that their careers are their own property, and efforts to shape the direction of their careers provide them with a means to assert agency in their life course’ (Tiedeman & Miller-Tiedman 1984 in King 2004: 113). It has been similarly claimed that individuals are not randomly assigned to situations (jobs/careers), but would rather seek out situations (jobs/careers) that are attractive to them (Schneider 1985). However, globalisation and industry restructuring in recent times have changed the way our careers are expected to unfold (Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzik & Kaiser 2013). Despite the efforts made to manage careers in the past, for many employees a feeling of insecurity has become commonplace. In addition, in our rapidly changing environments our initial choices of vocation, job or organisation do not always result in lifetime career satisfaction, but we increasingly need to focus on the accumulation of career capital as we may not need to move only from one organisation to another, but from one country or cultural context to another.

The United Nations estimates 232 million people live and work outside of their home countries (United Nations 2013). There are expatriates who are either sent by their employers (organisation sent expatriates, OEs) (Baruch, Dickmann, Altman & Bournois 2013) and those who ‘self-initiate their international relocation, with the intentions of regular employment and temporary stay’ (Cerdin & Selmer 2014: 1293) (self-initiated expatriates, SIEs) (Suutari & Brewster 2000, Favell, Feldblum & Smith 2007). There are also for example individuals who are forced to move and seek employment abroad (Al Ariss & Özbilgin 2010) often due to the political or social hardship in their home countries (Croucher 2012). Despite the difficulty of estimating the total number of SIEs they are said to represent an increasing and significant global staffing population (Jokinen, Brewster & Suutari 2008, Peltokorpi & Froese 2012). Their proportion is even said to exceed that of OEs (e.g., 65 % vs. 35 % in Tharenou & Caulfield 2010).

All types of expatriate careers have traditionally been expected to produce positive career outcomes (Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen & Bolino 2012). Despite this

assumption, in the literature, SIEs have often been presented as a group that considers itself as having a weaker position or fewer development opportunities during their expatriation employment (Biemann & Andresen 2010, Jokinen 2010) than OEs or other co-workers do. However, in contrast to OEs, literature often presents SIEs as a more protean group of individuals (Hall 1996) with an assumption that they, without the help of their employers or influence of the social context, would be capable of selecting and pursuing their career options (e.g., Doherty, Richardson & Thorn 2013, Suutari, Brewster & Tornikoski 2013) and trajectories (Pringle & Mallon 2003, Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh & Roper 2012). This proactive personal feature of SIEs is expected to manifest as an ability and willingness to take responsibility for personal employability (Clarke 2009) and a fit to local labour market conditions, and as the application of career self-management behaviour (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom 2005, Doherty, Dickmann & Mills 2011). However, the career experiences of individuals who initiate and develop their own international careers are more and more often presented in a negative light. Career-related challenges may for example be connected to feelings of professional frustration, under-employment, exploitation, the employability trap and competence erosion.

Therefore, the critics how little we actually know about individuals' perceptions over the capabilities and career outcomes (Gunz, Evans & Jalland 2002, Baruch 2003, Briscoe & Hall 2006), or career trajectories of SIEs (Tharenou 2015) are well deserved. There is, for example, little empirical evidence on how SIE careers actually develop in practice: how the employability and person to environment fit of SIEs are perceived, or how SIEs apply career self-management behaviour. In addition, expatriate literature has historically been mainly focused on OE careers in multinational corporations (MNCs) in western career contexts (Brewster, Bonache, Cerdin & Suutari 2014, Dabic, Gonzales-Loureiro & Harvey 2015) in 'easy' or less challenging career contexts (Tharenou 2013, 2015, Doherty 2013). Therefore, due to the increasing volume of free global talent flow (see Carr, Inkson & Thorn 2005), which is increasingly shaped and influenced by international and cross-cultural career contexts, there is a need to understand the career trajectories of different types of expatriates in different types of career contexts.

Metaphors have been used to analyse organisations in the management literature (see Morgan 2001), and have also been used in the careers literature to describe the features of careers, as such metaphors are 'used to advance thinking about careers' (Inkson, Dries & Arnold 2015: 21). Metaphors 'represent a natural human tendency to render complex and abstract phenomena understandable by making them concrete, and as far as possible human, in our minds' (Inkson

2007: 13). In the literature, careers have been presented and viewed from different metaphor perspectives. Careers have been seen for example as paths (Smith-Ruig 2008), as a game (Pryor & Bright 2009), or as rivers (Crowley-Henry 2012). Careers have also been presented as an inheritance, cycles, journeys, roles or relationships (Inkson et al., 2015), and as boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau 1996) or protean (Hall 1996). The current dissertation is focused on enhancing our understanding of the careers of SIEs by examining the careers of western SIEs in China and following the suggestion of Inkson, Dries and Arnold (2015) considering their careers from the perspectives of resources, fit and actions.

To facilitate this aim this dissertation approaches SIE careers from two perspectives: the one of individual employees and the one of employers. The individual employee perspective considers SIE careers primarily as resources in the form of perceived employability, and as actions in the form of career self-management. The employer perspective considers SIE careers mainly in terms of fit from different fit perspectives.

From the theoretical perspective, the notion of careers as a resource is reflected through the theoretical lens of perceived employability (Forrier & Sels 2003, Fugate, Kinicki & Ashfort 2004, Berntson, Sverke & Marklund 2006, Gazier 2001) and in conjunction with the conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll 1989, 2001, 2002, 2011). COR theory facilitates our understanding of the development process of resources that contribute to SIEs' perceptions of their personal employability.

The fit perspective is explored by examining the employers' perceptions of SIEs' fit to the environment (Dawis & Lofquist 1984, Edwards 1991, Judge & Ferris 1992), which is expected to contribute to their value to an employer. This is done by assessing the perceived fit to job (Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011), to group (Van Vianen 2000, Boon & Den Hartog 2011), to organisation (Kristof 1996) and to cultural context (Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown & Johnson 2004) of SIEs. These four fit aspects provide a more holistic approach to the topic and enhance our knowledge of the employability of SIEs, and their position as a potential staffing group.

And finally from the actions perspective, King's (2004) framework of career self-management behaviour based on the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist 1984) was used to facilitate our further understanding of the protean image of SIEs, and explain how SIEs actually use career self-management during the course of their expatriation in a particular career context and why.

From the contextual perspective, it has been said that the careers literature has ‘seriously underestimated the weight of cross-cultural differences in describing and explaining career phenomena’ (Inkson et al. 2015: 49). However, there is an increasing number of non-native individuals who self-directedly seek career opportunities (Jokinen et al. 2008) in international and cross-cultural career contexts, but who are often forced to base their career choices on their intuitions, rather than objective reality (see Rynes, Bretz & Gerhart 1990, Berntson, Sverke & Marklund 2006, Berntson & Marklund 2007, De Cuyper, de Jong, De Witte et al. 2008, Silla, De Cuyper, Gracia et al. 2009). From this perspective, this dissertation is focused on the careers of western SIEs in China. Despite recent economic difficulties (World Bank 2014) and an ongoing reputation for being the most demanding expatriation location for westerners (Brookfield 2012 -2015), China has become one the most common career destinations for expatriates (Bolchover 2010, Bruning, Sonpar & Wang 2012). Therefore China provides a timely career context for illuminating the careers of western SIEs in a cross-cultural career context.

The following Figure 1 illustrates how these three metaphor perspectives in a cross-cultural career context of China comprise the current dissertation. The individual SIE perspective is examined by considering careers as resources and actions, whereas careers as a fit highlight the employer perspective on the research question at hand within a particular career context, China.

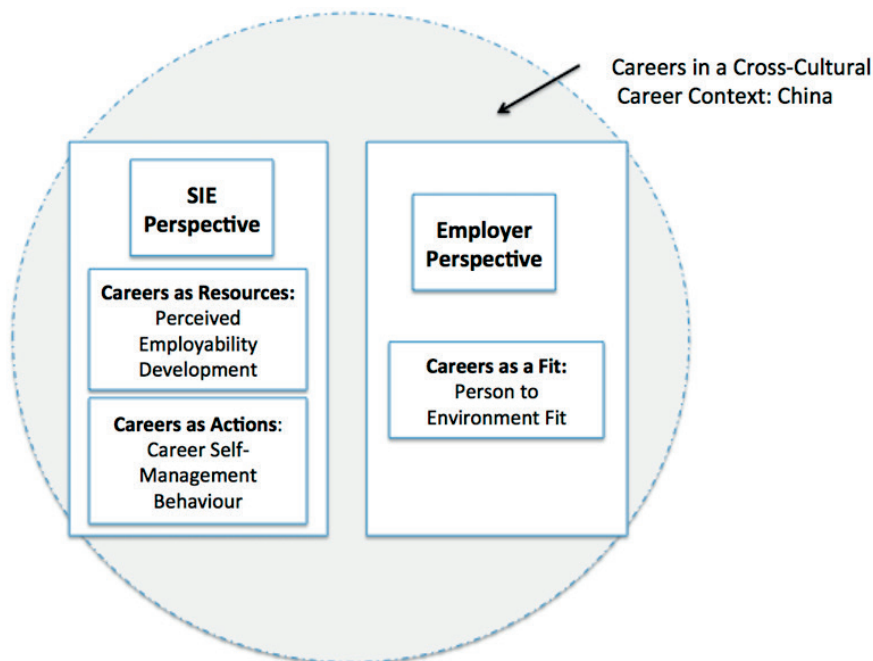


Figure 1. Theoretical perspectives that underpin the dissertation

1.2 Objectives of the dissertation

The objective of this dissertation is to shed light on the career experiences of western SIEs and answer the main research question:

How are the careers of self-initiated expatriates perceived and self-managed?

The main research question is answered by the sub-research questions of three sole-authored articles that form the basis of this dissertation:

Article 1: *How do western SIEs perceive the development of their employability in a culturally distant career context, and why?*

Article 2: *How is the employability of SIEs viewed by MNCs in comparison to other staffing groups in China from a fit perspective, and what drives their perceptions of fit?*

Article 3: *How do SIEs pursue labour market fit through career self-managed behaviour, and why?*

The scope of this dissertation is delimited by an examination of the careers of SIEs and considering those as resources (Article 1), in terms of career fit (Article 2) and actions (Article 3) in a particular context (China) as suggested by Inkson, Dries and Arnold (2015). Following the suggestion of Inkson (2004) each of these views is expected to represent a partial truth about their careers (Inkson 2004) but not the whole truth.

The following Table 1 presents information regarding the research objectives, type and context of sample, data collection period and theoretical grounding applied in each of the articles.

Table 1. Summary of the research objectives, sample, data collection period and theoretical grounding

	Article 1: SIE careers as resources	Article 2: SIE careers as fit	Article 3: SIE careers as actions
Research objective	To study the development of perceived employability among western SIEs in local organizations in China	To study the fit and employability of western SIEs from the MNC staffing perspective in China	To study how and why SIEs use career self-management behaviour
Sample and context	Interviews of 23 western SIEs with work experience in local organizations in China	Interviews of 24 staffing professionals with western MNC recruitment experience in China	Interviews of 23 western SIEs with work experience in local organizations in China
Data collection	January – April 2013	January – February 2014	January – April 2013
Theoretical grounding	<i>Perceived employability</i> (Forrier & Sels 2003, Fugate et al. 2004, Berntson et al. 2006, Gazier 2001) <i>Conservation of resources theory</i> (COR) (Hobfoll 1989, 2001, 2002, 2011)	<i>Person to Environment Fit theory</i> (Dawis 2002) <i>Person to Job fit</i> (Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011) <i>Person to Group fit</i> (Van Vianen 2000, Boone & Den Hartog 2011) <i>Person to Organisation fit</i> (Kristof 1996) <i>Person to Cultural Context fit</i> (Van Vianen et al. 2004)	<i>Career self-management behaviour</i> (King 2004) based on theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist 1984)

References to local organisations in China in this dissertation refer to firms that are fully Chinese owned and managed. For reasons of practicality those were located in the most developed areas of China: in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong province. These local organizations represent a cross-cultural career context in which there may be significant differences in everyday processes and behaviours between the Westerners – individuals coming from Europe and the Americas – and the host-country individuals, and the typical host country organisational culture (see Hofstede 1984, 1991, Oluwatoyin Olatundun 2009).

1.3 Intended contributions

Based on the research questions, this dissertation aims to make several contributions to SIE literature by examining (western) SIE career experiences from the perspective of both the individual SIEs and their employers.

First, by considering SIE careers as resources, this dissertation aims to illustrate how SIEs see the development of their perceived employability, particularly in a cross-cultural developing country career context (cf. Doherty 2013, Tharenou 2013) as recently called for by Tharenou (2015). By doing so this dissertation deepens our understanding of perceived employability and its long-term development among non-local employees (SIEs) in cross-cultural career settings.

Second, by considering SIE careers in terms of fit, this dissertation intends to contribute to the SIE literature by incorporating the neglected perspective of employers into the study of SIE fit and employability. This intention may help explain the negative career outcome experiences of SIEs often reported in the literature (e.g., Tharenou 2010, Hamori & Koyuncu 2011, Muir, Wallace & McMurray 2014, Rodriguez & Scurry 2014). The employer perspective also intends to add to our current understanding of SIE careers and how they are seen in comparison to other staffing groups. This helps us to build a more complete picture of SIEs, their characteristics, and their careers.

Third, by considering SIE careers as actions, this dissertation aims to contribute to SIE literature by examining the protean image often presented in the literature (see Crowley-Henry 2007). This dissertation elaborates on the kinds of career self-management behaviours SIEs use to manage their careers, and so take personal responsibility for their career development. This discussion helps us to examine how the career self-management behaviour of SIEs actually has an impact on their choices or career outcomes (Briscoe, Hall & DeMuth 2006, Baruch, Budhwar & Khatri 2007, Cao, Hirschi & Deller 2014).

And finally, although research should aim for generalisations, the necessity of having access to contextualised research addressing the development of context has also been stated. This need is based on an ability to make 'our models more accurate and interpretation of results more robust' (Schneider 1985 in Rousseau & Fried 2001:2). Therefore China as a research setting can illustrate how different types of cross-cultural phenomena both at the individual and organizational levels, and their relationships (Gelfand, Erez & Aycan 2007) have an impact on how the employability, fit and means of managing one's career can be seen in cross-cultural career settings from western SIE perspectives. Contextualisation is also said to be essential for 'developing value adding global

management knowledge especially in contexts that differ drastically from North American or Western European locations' (Tsui 2004: 496). Therefore this indigenous research does not intend to test existing theories, but to understand the career trajectories of western SIEs in cross-cultural career settings, more specifically in China.

1.4 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation comprises two sections. The first section of the dissertation is an introduction to the dissertation itself and to the research context, and the second consists of three sole-authored empirical research articles. Chapter one features the current introduction, the motivation behind the thesis and the research questions. Chapter two presents the main theories and approaches used in the dissertation as well as the research context. Chapter three presents the research methods together with a discussion of the quality of the research. And finally three individual studies that form the backbone of this dissertation are presented and discussed. In chapter five the findings are finally concluded, and both the theoretical contribution and implications for practice together with the limitations and suggestions for future studies are discussed in detail. In section two, all three studies are presented in their published form.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to facilitate our understanding of the careers of western SIEs in China, after the introduction to the concept of self-initiated expatriation the theoretical groundings of the dissertation are introduced. This is facilitated by introducing careers through the metaphors based on the classification by Inkson (2004) which presents careers as *resources*, *fit* and *actions*. Each of these sections also elaborates how these metaphors relate to the SIE perspective.

2.1 Self-initiated expatriation

Self-initiated expatriation is a career-related phenomenon of individuals relocating and working abroad on their own initiative (Andresen, Al Ariss & Walther 2013). The research tradition on self-initiated expatriates, which stems from the studies of Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry (1997), and Suutari and Brewster (2000), is quite recent and therefore the characteristics and definitions of SIEs have been the subject recent debate (Doherty, Richardson & Thorn 2013, Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry 2013, Haslberger & Vaiman 2013, Andresen, Bergendolt, Margenfeld & Dickmann 2014, Cerdin & Selmer 2014). Literature has also made several attempts to distinguish between OEs, SIEs and talented migrants (Cerdin & Le Pargneux 2010, Al Ariss et al. 2012, Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry 2013, Peltokorpi & Froese 2013, Andresen et al. 2014, Cerdin & Selmer 2014).

SIEs have been defined as ‘individuals who travel abroad (usually as tourists or students), but who seek work as they travel and are hired in the foreign location, often by firms from their home country’ (Briscoe et al. 2009: 169). They have also been defined as professionals who choose on their own initiative to expatriate, and who are not transferred by their employers and may not have a definite timeframe in mind (Suutari & Brewster 2000, Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas 2004, Tharenou 2010). One of the most recent definitions, which is also adopted in the current dissertation, is one by Cerdin and Selmer (2014:1293) describing them as individuals who ‘self-initiate their international relocation, with the intentions of regular employment and temporary stay’. This definition highlights their differences in comparison to immigrants. Whereas the term SIE has a more positive connotation, immigrants are often discussed in a more negative tone. Immigrants – less skilled or educated individuals who have moved from developing countries to developed ones with a more permanent intention (Al Ariss & Syed 2011) – differ from SIEs in terms of their geographical origin,

intended destination, nature of movement and intended length of stay (Andresen et al. 2014). Despite these conceptual differences, from the identity perspective, some expatriates with long-term expatriation experience do consider themselves immigrants rather than expatriates (von Koppenfels 2014) hence highlighting the fuzziness of these concepts.

Although many SIE studies often depict young (Tharenou 2003), well-educated and career driven individuals from the western world holding good positions in developed countries (Inkson et al. 1997, Doherty 2013, Tharenou 2013), there have also been many attempts to define further SIE qualities, particularly in comparison to organisation sent expatriates (OEs) and migrants (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry 2013, Andresen et al. 2014, Cerdin and Selmer 2014). The most distinctive factors that separate SIEs from OEs are their role as the initiator for their own employment, change of work contract partner, and type of mobility (Andresen et al. 2014). Unlike for OEs, for SIEs the length of stay is often not predetermined, they tend to expatriate for longer than OEs do, and they seldom have any repatriation plans (Suutari & Brewster 2000). In the case of OEs, their mobility is inter-organisational and they tend to work within the same organizational boundaries and goals (Andresen et al. 2014).

How do careers in general and the careers of SIEs appear in the literature from the perspective of resources, fit and actions? The following sections review the literature on careers with the help of the aforementioned career metaphors – resources, fit and actions.

2.2 Careers as resources

Resources from the traditional perspective are a stock or supply that can be drawn on by an individual or an organization (Barney, Ketcher & Wright 2011). Although individuals are often regarded as resources to their employers, careers can also be considered as resources by individuals (Inkson et al. 2015). This assumption is based on a remark on how individuals are, during the course of their careers, expected to accumulate resources such as ‘competencies, expertise, networks, reputation and financial reserves, all of which can be transferred to other employment settings’ (Inkson et al. 2015: 240) and help them to achieve their desired career-related outcomes such as perceived employability.

2.2.1 Concept of perceived employability

Perceived employability is a relatively recent concept (Berntson et al. 2006, Gazier 2001). It has been defined as a subjective opinion of an individual's likelihood of their acquiring or keeping a job of a similar or better level in the future (Berntson et al. 2006, Rothwell & Arnold 2007, Wittekind, Raeder & Grote 2010). The definition of perceived employability is based on four aspects of employability: perceptions (Katz & Kahn 1978), level of ease, phase of career (after school, unemployed, or employed), and quality (equal, eroded, or better) (Berntson, Näswall & Sverke 2008, De Cuyper & De Witte 2010) for the same or another employer (Rothwell & Arnold 2007, De Cuyper & De Witte 2010).

High perceived employability has been connected to multiple favourable outcomes such as better health, general well-being (Berntson & Marklund 2007, De Cuyper et al. 2008a), perceived career success and job satisfaction (Hall 2002, Forrier & Sels 2003, De Cuyper, De Witte, Kinnunen & Nätti 2010, Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden 2006). High perceived employability has also been seen to positively influence an individual's perceived value in the labour markets (De Vos, De Hauw & Van der Heijden 2011), to offer greater control over the individual's working life (Berntson & Näswall 2010), productivity (Fugate et al. 2004), but also appear as high mobility or low employee commitment (Kondratuk, Hausdorf, Korabik & Rosin 2004). Low perceived employability in turn has been connected to job insecurity and stress (e.g., De Witte 1999, De Witte & Näswall 2003, Bernhard-Oettel, Sverke & De Witte 2005, Berntson & Näswall 2010) and fear of potential involuntary job loss (Sverke, Hellgren & Näswall 2002, Fugate et al. 2004). Particularly involuntary temporary and/or fixed-term jobs, and permanent workers with little job security have therefore been connected to the perceptions of low employability (Atkinson 1984, De Cuyper, Notelaer & De Witte 2009, De Cuyper et al. 2010). On the other hand, there are also individuals who are willing to change jobs or move to another place because of temporary or fixed-term jobs (Griffeth, Steel, Allen & Bryan 2005) if those jobs are to facilitate gaining personal resources such as personal competencies and skills, relationships and networks that could further induce new career opportunities and thus enhance perceptions of high employability (Marler, Barringer & Milkovich 2002).

There is a vast amount of literature emphasising the attributes that effect the perceptions of the levels of employability. Empirical studies have demonstrated the impact of individual's job-related qualifications, skills and demographics (Van der Heijden 2002, Rothwell & Arnold 2007, Wittekind et al. 2010) as well as the ability to find employment through having professional networks (Fugate

et al. 2004), labour market knowledge and job-seeking skills (Hillage & Pollard 1998, Rothwell & Arnold 2007, Wittekind et al. 2010), or career self-managed behaviour (Clarke 2009) and perceived mobility (Kirves et al. 2013). Other individual related attributes are the ability to respond effectively to changing circumstances, a willingness to develop new competencies or to change jobs (Wittekind et al. 2010), and perceived mobility (Kirves et al. 2013). There are however context-related attributes that contribute to perceptions. Examples include the global economic situation, state of particular industry, the type of employing organisation (Berntson, et al. 2006) or the type of contract (Kirves et al. 2013). One timely context-related remark is that employees in booming sectors might perceive themselves to be better than their counterparts in less successful sectors (Wittekind et al. 2010). Logically, the converse should apply too, with workers in failing industries perceiving themselves less worthy than those in successful sectors. There should therefore be an emphasis on the role of the employing organisation and its support for personal career development and opportunities (De Vos et al. 2011).

2.2.2 Development of perceived employability from the conservation of resources theory perspective

Although employees are generally quite good at estimating the level of their employability they may sometimes think themselves better than their supervisors do (Van der Heijden 2000), or they have a rosier image of themselves than is actually merited (Tsui & Ohlott 1988). Similarly even though the existing literature on the development aspect of employability is fairly scarce and only three previous studies could be found (Berntson et al. 2008, Mäkikangas et al. 2013, Kirves, Kinnunen, De Cuyper & Mäkikangas 2014), it is important to recognise that perceived employability is not a stable construct but one that evolves dynamically over time (De Cuyper et al. 2012, Mäkikangas et al. 2013, Kirves et al. 2014). This happens when personal resources that contribute to it are either acquired or lost (Hobfoll 2011), or if the contextual attributes that contribute to the process change (Forrier & Sels 2003).

Therefore, following Hobfoll's (1989, 2001, 2002, 2011) conservation of resources theory (COR), perceived employability can be considered a context-specific personal resource (Silla et al. 2009, De Cuyper et al. 2012) that interacts with other resources. This interaction results either in gained or lost resources, in forms of resource spirals (Berntson et al. 2006, Kirves et al. 2014). Personal resources are also said to tend to travel as caravans (Hobfoll 2011). This connection between the acquired or lost resources, contextual settings and perceived employability puts an emphasis not only on the level of perceptions

(low vs. high) but also on the development aspect employability (stable, decreasing or increasing) (Mroczek, Almeida, Spino & Pafford 2006). The following figure illustrates four different hypothetical examples of perceived employability development trajectories (stable high, increasing, decreasing and variant) when assessed at four points in the timeline.

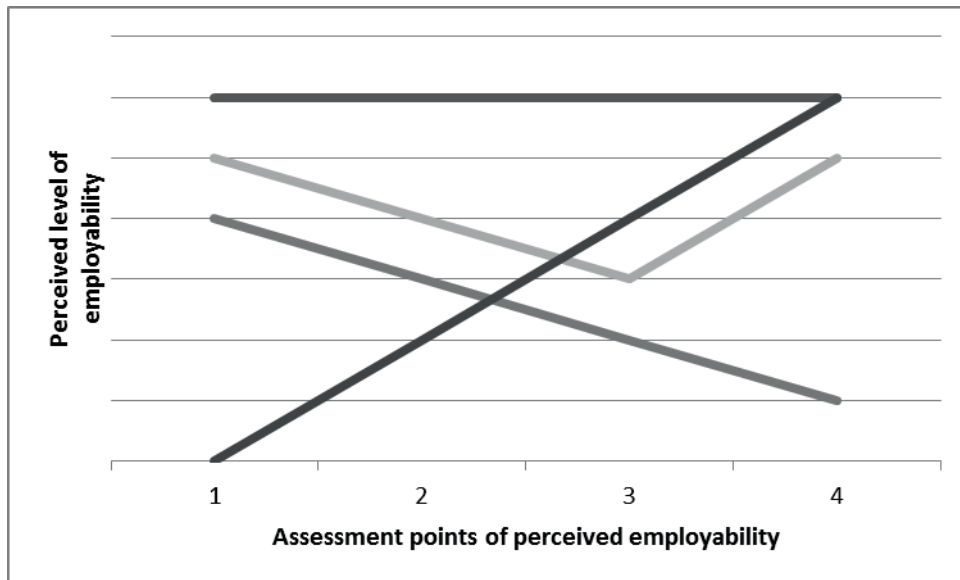


Figure 2. Four hypothetical examples of PE development trajectories: stable high, increasing, decreasing and variant

2.2.3 Self-initiated expatriate careers in terms of resources

SIE careers have been reported to enhance resources that contribute to employability and the fit of individuals. Positive career outcomes have been connected for example to accumulation of career competencies in terms of knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom (DeFilippi & Arthur 1996, Jokinen et al. 2008). However despite the positive outcome expectations (Shaffer et al. 2010), SIE careers have been presented in both a positive and negative light (Hall 2002, Jokinen et al. 2008, Tharenou 2010, De Vos et al. 2011, Hamori & Koyuncu 2011, Muir et al. 2014, Rodriguez & Scurry 2014). For example, SIEs have often been said to be in a weaker position than other staffing groups (Suutari & Brewster 2000, Jokinen et al. 2008, Biemann & Andresen 2010, Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010). These perceptions are typically discussed in conjunction with their financial arrangements, the lower level of organisational support received, or the lack of development and progression opportunities available to them (Biemann & Andresen 2010, Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010). Challenges can similarly stem from the lack of a repatriation plan offered by the

employer upon repatriation (Suutari & Brewster 2000, Begley, Collings & Scullion 2008).

The challenges mentioned above are often linked to the fact SIE contracts are usually managed at the local level (a difference from OEs) and that they tend to have a weaker intra-organisational network of promoters (Jokinen et al. 2008). Consequently they have perceptions of having fewer career opportunities as a result of their stay (Baruch et al. 2013). Particularly in cross-cultural career settings, SIEs have been reported to feel threatened by negative career outcomes arising from their career choices (Tharenou 2010, Hamori & Koyuncu 2011, Muir et al. 2014, Rodriguez & Scurry 2014). In such career contexts, the challenges have been connected to perceptions of limited organisational support and development opportunities in the host organisations (Cerdin & Selmer 2014; Muir et al. 2014), limited cultural understanding and limited language skills (Lauring & Selmer 2011, Peltokorpi & Clausen 2011).

On the other hand, the characteristics of SIEs could perhaps also be considered a source of such perceptions. Due to their protean attitude, SIEs have been found to have lower levels of organisational embeddedness due to their more frequent changes of organisations (Biemann & Andresen 2010). SIEs may also have adjustment challenges to their roles (Peltokorpi 2008, Peltokorpi & Froese 2009, Cao et al. 2014) or issues arising from working under the supervision of host-country managers (Peltokorpi & Froese 2014) in the host-country organisations, which may affect their PE development.

All in all, it appears that SIE careers may be challenging from the employee perspective and very little is known of how SIEs actually perceive the development of their employability during the course and as a result of their SIE experience. In addition, being able to review the perspective of employers allows for a more holistic understanding of the careers of SIEs. This is facilitated by considering SIE careers as a fit and adopting the theory of person to environment fit, which is introduced below.

2.3 Careers as fit

Careers can be seen as a match or a fit (Inkson et al. 2015). Objective fit often refers to congruence between the individual's abilities, skills, values, interests and personality and the requirements of the environment (and jobs/employers/labour markets) (Ehrhart 2006, Inkson et al. 2015). This kind of fit is expected to appear in the form of mutual benefits. Individuals whose careers are a good fit gain life and job satisfaction as well as physical and mental well-

being (De Cuyper, et al. 2008a, Kirves, Kinnunen & De Cuyper 2013). Organisations on the other hand expect to gain resources that they need. The definition of fit however, which can be both quantitative and qualitative in nature, depends on the perspective it is explored from (Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011). Fit could be defined as a perceived feeling of how well a person fits within their particular environment, or how well the environment is fulfilling the individual's psychological and physical needs. (Edwards, Caplan & Harrison 1998). Fit could also be considered, as in the present dissertation, as an employer's assessment of a candidate's employability, which is based on his/her ability to perform the tasks required in a particular environment (Edwards 1991).

2.3.1 Person to environment fit theory

The roots of the person to environment fit theory proposed by Holland lead as far back as 1909 and Person's congruence concept in vocational guidance (in Ostroff, Shin & Feiberg 2002). It is based on the assumption that both an individual and a person's environment interact with each other in pursuit of positive outcomes and mutual fit (Ehrhart 2006). The skills of an individual correspond with and respond to the requirements of the work environment, and the rewards achieved on the other hand correspond to the requirements of the individual (Davis & Lofquist 1984: 54-55). This fit can be either supplementary or complementary. Supplementary fit is used for illustrating similarities whereas complimentary fit describes those characteristics that add to the entity by making it whole (Muchinsky & Monahan 1987).

Traditionally the success of correspondence has been projected by the length of tenure that has been the most basic indicator of correspondence between the individual and the work environment (Davis & Lofquist 1984: 54-55). However, owing to the transformational nature of labour markets and the contextual nature of labour market legislation, the tenure of employment seems to lose its value for determining fit and must be defined by using other indicators. Davis and Lofquist (1984) developed the concepts of satisfactoriness and satisfaction as a replacement for correspondence and tenure . These indicate the degree of success an individual has been able to achieve and maintain in the work environment. Satisfactoriness is an external indicator of correspondence (by employer) and satisfaction is internal (subjective, perceived) (ibid: 55-56). However, these dimensions of fit do change over time and both an individual and work environment are required to apply adjusting mechanisms that would suit the typical means of interacting within one's environment. Typically, the adjustment can include concrete actions such as career self-management

measures that aim to change individuals themselves or the environment (King 2004) in order to achieve sufficient demands-abilities or/and needs-supplies fit (Sekiguchi 2004a).

Alongside the theory development, the way in which the environment can be defined has also taken new forms. Traditionally, the environment has been understood as a job (Sekiguchi 2004b, Carless 2005, Ehrhart 2006, Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011,) that is focused to match a person's knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) and the job requirements (Sekiguchi 2004a, b), or as an organisation (P-O) (Lauver & Kristof-Brown 2001, Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011) that underlines the match between the person and the goals and values of an employing organisation. More recently, the environment has been understood as a group (P-G) such as co-workers and superiors (Van Vianen 2000, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson 2005, Boon & Den Hartog 2011) or as a cultural context (P-C) in which a particular interaction takes place (Van Vianen, et al. 2004, Jun and Gentry 2005, Peltokorpi & Froese 2014).

2.3.2 Fit as a tool

As a concept, the person to environment fit has been widely used as a tool for staffing, career counselling and interventions (Savickas 2012), defining HRM practices such as recruitment and work design (Lee & Ramaswami 2013), predicting stress (Caplan 1983, 1987), job involvement, organisational commitment (Blau 1987), job satisfaction (Hardin & Donaldson 2014), and as a tool for studying the relationship between a fit and cross-cultural adjustment among SIEs for instance (Nolan & Morley 2014). Despite its usefulness, however, it has also recently been criticised. The criticism stems from the concept's western tradition and how the three parameters of fit (concept of person (Hwang 2011), interpretation of an environment (Weick 1995) and the underlying assumption of relations between a person and an environment (Nisbett 2003)) are defined. A recent empirical study by Chuang, Hsu, Wang and Judge (2015) illustrates how a fit can be interpreted differently from one career context to another. This challenge elaborates on the importance of the correct interpretation of the fit in each career context. Failure to achieve that fit may have significant implications both for the careers and lives of individuals as well as for the performance of organisations. For example, individuals with individualistic dispositions operating in collectivistic work environments (see Hofstede 1984) are less likely to change their behaviour to a more co-operative form of behaviour. This unbalance can result in unwanted conflicts in organisations (Sekiguchi 2004b) and result, in the case of expatriates, as

perceptive expatriate failure, early repatriation and poor performance of an organisation.

2.3.3 Dynamic nature of fit

Fit is a dynamic concept, and accordingly a perceived feeling of a good fit today does not predict the state of a fit in the future, but is dependent on the stability of the context (environment) (Muchinsky & Monahan 1987, Sekiguchi 2004a, b). Therefore, based on a fact that each type of fit should be treated as a distinct construct with a low correlation with the others (Lauver & Kristof-Brown 2001), a comprehensive evaluation of different aspects of fit is important. This need applies both to individuals seeking for career paths and to organisations seeking employees in today's complex environments (Sekiguchi 2004a) that would provide positive career outcomes such as perceptions of high employability. Therefore, countering the traditional staffing approach focused on the fit between the job requirements, and a candidate's education, past experience, and cognitive skills (Aycan, 2005), the employability of SIEs from the employer perspective in this dissertation is assessed from multiple fit perspectives: fit to job, group, organization and cultural context. This assessment offers a more coherent understanding of the perceptions of employers. Similarly, although the person to environment fit can be evaluated from both the subjective and objective viewpoints, this study is focused on the subjective or perceived fit, terms that have often been used interchangeably (Judge & Cable 1997, Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011).

2.3.4 Self-initiated expatriate careers in terms of fit

SIEs have often been praised for their fit in terms of their cross-cultural skills, local networks (Froese & Peltokorpi 2013), and cultural adjustment (Lo, Won, Yam & Whitfield 2012), which would in turn suggest they are a cost effective substitute for OEs (e.g., Tharenou & Harvey 2006, McKenna & Richardson 2007, Scullion, Collings & Gunnigle 2007, Peltokorpi & Froese 2012, Andresen, Bergdolt & Margenfeld 2013). Regardless of the increasing significance of SIEs as a potential staffing option from the global labour force perspective (Jokinen et al. 2008, Peltokorpi & Froese 2012), there is scant literature on their effect on HRM (Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010, Tharenou & Caulfield 2010) or how SIEs should be seen from the staffing perspective. Particularly the current MNC staffing literature with a few exceptions largely neglects the role of SIEs in MNC subsidiary staffing, (e.g., Tharenou 2013).

In this dissertation Perceived Employability in conjunction with Conservation of Resources theory, and Person to Environment Fit provide us with a holistic basis for assessing both the employee and employer perspectives on the careers of SIEs as resources and as a fit. However, there is little research available to clarify the actions of SIEs: how and why SIEs actually use career self-management behaviour during the course of their assignments. Therefore, King's (2004) framework of career self-management behaviour was applied to enhance our understanding of the action perspective of SIE careers and is introduced in the following.

2.4 Careers as actions

Careers can be seen as something that 'do not just happen to us: [careers] are something we *do*' (Inkson et al. 2015: 114.) Actions in conjunction with *personal agency* refer to individuals 'taking initiative, attempts for making progress through personal action and taking charge of own careers (Svejenova, Vives & Alvarez 2010). Personal agency means individuals' ability 'to make choices and to impose these choices on the world' (Seeck and Parzefall 2008 in Inkson et al. 2015: 114). From this perspective it is assumed that 'if people are empowered to take responsibility for their own careers and are provided with the information and skills to do so, then they will act on their own careers to make decisions, leading to greater career satisfaction and success' (ibid:115). Therefore, it is essential for us to understand how and why individuals act to benefit their careers.

2.4.1 Career self-management

The term career self-management has been used interchangeably with the terms individual career management, and proactive career behaviour and accumulation of career competencies (Sturges, Guest, Conway & Mackenzie-Davey 2002, King 2004, Kuijpers, Schyns & Scheerens 2006). It is also used to describe proactive behaviour or strategies that individual employees use to define and realise their personal career objectives as well as the application of concrete actions or strategies to progress their careers (King, 2004, De Vos & De Soens 2008).

The way we understanding contemporary careers is increasingly based on the assumption that individual employees should take responsibility for and manage their own careers and employability proactively through career management behaviour (Orpen 1995, Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, & Demarr 1998, King 2004). There is also an assumption that such individuals would be able, without the

influence of the social context, to select and pursue their careers and career trajectories (Pringle & Mallon 2003, Inkson et al. 2012,). These assumptions have been strongly linked to the concept of protean careers (e.g., Hall & Moss 1998, Hall 2002, 2004, Granrose & Baccili 2006, Lips-Wiersma & Hall 2007, Cappellen & Janssens 2008, Vos & Soens 2008). This linkage suggests that individuals with a protean career attitude are more likely to bolster their career success through concrete career self-management actions (Hall 2004), consequently their perceptions of fit and employability will be boosted too.

2.4.2 King's framework of career self-management behaviour

Crites (1969, 1976) was interested in career self-management behaviour and provided a model of vocational adjustment, which has in turn provided grounds for King's framework (2004). King's model is based on the idea that individuals with boundaryless careers in particular are personally responsible for seeking out opportunities, updating their skills portfolio, and getting themselves 'seen' and making themselves employable in the labour markets. According to King's framework, particularly the anxiety and the tension resulting from conflictual and frustrating working conditions act as stimuli for people to adopt different mechanisms for adjustment (see also Crites 1969: 404-406). King's framework offers an alternative to the basic assumption of protean careers, and is based on the assumption that individuals cannot always influence the way their careers are developing, and nor do they have all the power they would wish over their desired career outcomes, such as salary progression, skills development or contract renewal. These decisions are affected by people called gatekeepers, who hold key positions in the organisations and social structures of the career context (King 2001). Individuals therefore seek ways to influence those gatekeepers by using different types of behaviour or strategies aim for positive outcomes. King (2004) has divided the means of behaviour into three groups by which means individuals conduct their career self-management behaviour or usage of different strategies to influence the decisions of the gatekeepers:

- 1) *Positioning behaviour*. This strategy refers to the deliberate choice of mobility opportunities, investment in human capital in the form of training or qualifications, active development of networks, making innovations that have an impact on job content or becoming a valuable expert.
- 2) *Influence behaviour*. This strategy refers to active attempts to influence the gatekeepers to achieve targeted career outcomes. It could be done by self-probing and manipulation of the perceived performance, by

ingratiation and making oneself seem attractive, and by upward influence meaning behaviour intended to increase the gatekeeper's sense of obligation to fulfil individual employees' needs and desires.

- 3) *Boundary management*. This strategy refers to an attempt to balance the work and non-work related environments by acquiring different roles. It can be done by boundary maintenance, or role transitions, meaning switching roles between the working and home environments (King 2004).

2.4.3 Outcomes of career self-management

Although career self-management has been associated with positive career outcomes on career satisfaction, perceived career success and employability (Seibert et al. 1999, Seibert, Crant & Kraimer 1999, Eby, Butts & Lockwood 2003, Heslin 2003, Kuijpers et al. 2006) contrasting results can be found too indicating that certain self-management behaviour does not automatically produce perceptions of success or employability (De Vos & Soens 2008), but such perceptions might instead be more strongly connected to an individual's protean career attitude. King (2004) and Briscoe et al. (2006) have also pointed out how career self-management behaviour might be more typical for those who are naturally highly motivated and skilled in managing their careers, whereas employees with a more traditional career approach tend to be more passive and look to their employer for support. From the cross-cultural career setting perspective, it is worth pinpointing how certain career self-management behaviour practices may not easily transfer from one context to another (King 2004).

2.4.4 Self-initiated expatriate careers in terms of actions

Following the characteristics and definition of SIEs adopted in this dissertation (see Cerdin & Selmer 2014) SIE careers could be considered a form of temporary, but often voluntary, employment. Therefore, it is no surprise that they have often been connected to ideas of protean (Hall 1996) and boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau 1996), and presented as individuals capable of and willing to managing their own careers (Arthur et al. 2005, Doherty et al. 2011).

A protean attitude in the context of SIEs refers to the idea of proactive career self-management behaviour (Seibert, Kraimer & Crant 2001). Individuals with a protean attitude are expected to target specific desired career outcomes (King

2004), to be interested in remaining competitive (Clarke 2009) and to proactively work at their career development (Seibert et al. 2001, Inkson et al. 2012). This in turn is expected to imbue them with positive perceived employability development and fit. Following this reasoning, individuals with such qualities are also more likely to accept insecurity as a given feature of their careers (De Cuyper & De Witte 2007). Proactivity is thus also likely to manifest itself in the form of career resilience, which is exemplified by characteristics such as self-belief, a willingness to take risks, and a need for achievement. Proactivity has also been connected to actions such as preparedness for job mobility and seeking developmental feedback, which are central to creating career networks, coping with work stress and challenges, and adjusting to changes in the organisation and environment (Chiaburu, Baker & Pitariu 2006).

Despite their protean image, there is also an ongoing discussion over whether self-management behaviour actually has an impact on SIE mobility choices or career success, or if SIEs are capable of influencing their career outcomes, and consequently perceptions of fit or employability at all. There are both positive (Briscoe et al. 2006, Cao, Hirchi & Deller 2013) and negative findings (Baruch et al. 2007). In addition to their protean characteristics, research has discussed other motivational factors that affect SIE actions. The literature lists their actions in conjunction with their personal economics or lifestyle, abilities, location and personal interest or perceived suitability of the host-country culture (Carr et al. 2005, Inkson 2005, Selmer & Luring 2010, Doherty et al. 2011) that would fulfil their career aspirations. SIE motivations have similarly been found to be simply connected to weak labour markets in the home country (Froese 2012). As a whole, however, there is very little empirical evidence on how protean or self-managed SIEs actually are, and we do not fully understand how and why they use career self-management behaviour.

2.5 Careers in context: China

Careers do not exist in a vacuum but in a context, which offers both challenges and opportunities. It has been said that in order to understand careers, it is essential to understand the context of careers, and how the careers and career decisions are understood and influenced by the context (Inkson et al. 2015). This understanding also helps us to understand the factors that give rise to our observations and how situations influence behaviour and perceptions (Funder 2001). Borrowing from Bourdieu there are two critical concepts, the field and the habitus, which are related to each other and help us understand better the context that applies to careers (in Mayrhofer, Iallatchitch, Meyer et al. 2004).

According to Bourdieu fields are ‘the social spaces in which people live and are characterised by internal complexity and hierarchy’ whereas habitus ‘is the system of internal, personal, enduring dispositions through which we perceive the world’ (in Inkson et al. 2015: 39). Particularly ‘fields’ is a target of change and defines how we interpret careers (Savickas 2000). For these reasons in the following the cross-cultural career context of China is reflected from the perspectives of its economical, technological, and labour market supply and demand development, and China as a cross-cultural career context for the Westerners.

2.5.1 Economic and technological development

Despite its current issues, China is still one of the fastest growing economies with an average annual growth of 10% for the past thirty years as a result of the new economic reform in 1978 and China’s WTO membership in 2001 (Feng 2009, National Intelligence Council 2012, World Bank 2014, Morrison 2014). China is also estimated to become the largest single economy by the year 2030 (National Intelligence Council 2012: 9-11) and one the most likely emerging market destination for all kinds of expatriates (Bolchover 2010, Brookfield 2015). This rapid economic and technological development of China, supported by strong governmental political and financial will (Yang & Stoltenberg 2014), has not only enhanced the technological level of local organisations, but also led to a rise in the number of western MNCs attracted to operate in China. Despite the initial motivations related to cheaper manufacturing costs (Fryxell, Butler & Choi 2004), global MNCs have recently seen the opportunities arising from the increasing purchasing power of the local markets (Morrison 2014).

2.5.2 Labour market demand and supply development

As a result of this rapid technological and economic development, both local and international companies operating in China have a history of suffering from the severe imbalance between the demand and supply in suitable labour force (Wu 2008, Brantingham & Nosal 2013). This means that western MNC subsidiaries have struggled to meet their staffing needs and find individuals capable of implementing subsidiary business strategies, coordinating and controlling routine business activity, and developing HR activities in line with (western) corporate policy (Harzing 2001, Hocking, Brown & Harzing 2004). They are also in need of people who can understand local market needs and practice (Kühlman & Hutchings 2010) without compromising their corporate business ethics (Ghauri & Fang 2001). Quite recently, however, it has been getting easier to find

local talent with the right fit (Kühlman & Hutchings 2010). This is particularly true if an employer is willing to compromise on the expected levels of experience (Brantingham & Nosal 2013), or recruit Chinese talent (Sea Turtles) returning home from Europe, the United States or Australia with experience of western culture and languages (Li 2005, Yip & McKern 2014).

The highest concentrations of foreigners are in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong province. In total there are at least 600 000 foreigners living and working legally in China and the total number of foreigners in China could be much higher. Of the total number of foreigners approximately one-third are westerners. In addition to this figure, there are numerous western frequent flyers and short-term assignees (Collings, Scullion & Morley 2007), flexpatriates (Mayerhofer, Hartmann, Michelitsch-Riedl & Kollinger 2004), and business travellers (Welch, Welch & Worm 2007) that frequently contribute to conducting business locally. Despite the increasing numbers of foreigners in China, the relative number of OEs is predicted to decrease. This trend is connected to rising living, manufacturing and labour costs, poor living and environmental conditions as well as tightening visa regulations and the political atmosphere in China (Dezan Shira & Associates 2014, Brookfield 2015). These factors together with the current state of global economics are causing MNCs to reconsider their operational strategies (Zheng 2015) and putting pressure on them to reduce assignment costs by increasing the extent of localisation, local hires, volume of extended business travelling (Brookfield 2015) and reshoring manufacturing. At the same time, there is a clear shift regarding the roles of western expatriates which are increasingly moving towards filling the managerial skills gap, rather than transferring technical skills. Nonetheless, MNC managerial positions in China are increasingly being taken up by local talent (Brookfield 2015, Dezan Shira & Associates 2014).

2.5.3 China as a cross-cultural career context for Westerners

From an academic perspective there are several reports on OE careers in China (e.g., Napier & Taylor 2002, Selmer 1999, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006, Hutchings, French & Hatcher 2008, Zimmermann, Holman & Sparrow 2003). However, from an SIE career perspective China seems to be a rather neglected research context. There are however some exceptions; for example Vance (2005) studied the pre-international career path strategies of 48 American expatriates in East Asia; Lauring and Selmer (2014) studied the impact of demographics of SIE academics in China on job adjustment, performance and satisfaction in their empirical study; and Muir, Wallace and McMurray (2014) have empirically

studied the careers of western SIE women in China, which they found to be complex.

These studies highlight how as a cross-cultural career context, China can be regarded as the most demanding expatriate location with the greatest potential for expatriation failure for westerners (Brookfield 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, Neidel 2012). This may be connected to the expatriates who go there having relatively little international experience, because China has struggled to attract experienced managers (Brookfield 2015), but most challenges westerners face stem from the Chinese language (Selmer 2006), and its (from the western perspective) paradoxical culture (Warner 2009). Therefore, the Chinese career context is not only challenging for westerners to comprehend, but also to work efficiently within (Lassere & Ching 1997).

Chinese culture, which is based on Confucian values, is grounded in Hofstede's cultural dimensions terms particularly on high collectivism, power-distance, and a long-term orientation (Hofstede 1984, 2002, Hofstede & Hofstede 2001). These values manifest in the importance ascribed to maintaining face, harmony and long-term relationships (Dunfee & Warrant 2001). In practice, for example, these cultural values appear as tendency to consider individuals either as in-group or out-group members based on their *guanxi* – an inbuilt social structure based on strong long-term relationships and an obligation to exchange favours (Dunfee & Warrant 2001, Child & Warner 2003). *Guanxi* also affects how business is conducted, how promotions are decided, and how the (local) organisations are managed. From this perspective, foreigners are typically considered as temporary and thus out-group members who are likely to receive less support from their host country co-workers (Varma, Budhwar & Pichler 2011). Similarly, the paternalistic corporate culture (Farh & Cheng 2000) with its natural respect for authority may provide fruitful grounds for abusive supervisor behaviour, which has typically been considered as acceptable by the locals (Ng, Chen & Aryee 2012), but is poorly tolerated by westerners. These contextual attributes and challenges arising, for example from individualistic versus collectivistic ways of conducting tasks (Tsui 2004, Hofstede 1994, Hofstede & Hofstede 2001) may hinder the efficient performance of westerners. These practical challenges put also stress on the HRM practices of MNCs operating in emerging economies that are often typically based on western individualistic underpinnings (Warner 2009).

Although at the general level any culture can be considered as remarkably stable over time (Minkov & Blagoev 2009), the Chinese culture and ways of conducting work are also transforming. Recent studies report a slow change of values among

the younger Chinese generation towards more individualistic behaviour (Cooke 2009). Instead of emphasising collectivism, there is a shift towards valuing personal material achievements, performance and competitiveness that override traditional values of equity and group solidarity or organisational commitment (Leung 2008). This development is explained by China's recent one child policy (Liu, McMahon & Watson 2015), but more often by its rapid economic growth influenced by western business habits, which tend to emphasise individualistic behaviour over collectivism (Minkov & Blagoev 2009).

3 METHODS

3.1 Epistemological and ontological considerations

Management studies have historically been based on the assumption that everything that exists is a combination of relationships, processes and structures that can be measured and tested by quantitative measures (Örtenblad 2002). Or that all studies provide hard, reliable, objective and fact based information about the world (Oakley 2000). This tradition has however been criticised for the exclusion of meaning and purpose, for context stripping, and for its inability to provide information on concepts based on subjective experience. Following the idea of Guba and Lincoln: 'human behaviour... cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors' (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 106). Due to this omission, there has been a clear shift towards a more interpretative research paradigm during the past decades that is, according to Cresswell (1994), more focused on problems related to holistic and complex settings.

The background for this dissertation follows the notion of Dubois and Gadde (2014) that sometimes, instead of spotting a particular research gap, an interesting empirical observation with a particular reality provides opportunities to identify exciting research phenomena. This notion is also supported by Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) who state that empirical findings sometimes play a major role in the formulation of the study. In 2012, I met an old school friend who as a result of the closure of a Nokia R&D centre in Finland, had moved to China to work for a local Chinese employer. I was curious to hear about his experience and it was fascinating to listen to his stories about his personal career experiences in a new and culturally distant career context, as well as the incidents of some of his pioneering peers. His vivid stories and experiences stayed with me and I became more curious about the phenomenon. Later in the same year I started looking for literature on self-initiated westerners in China and realised how novel and emerging the phenomenon of westerners working in local organisations in culturally distant organisations really is. Finally, I got asked my friend if he would like to share his career story, and if he could introduce some other westerners with a career experience in local organisations in China for the purpose of my dissertation, to which he agreed.

Due to these very subjective experiences in a very complex career setting and the focus of this dissertation being on subjective perceptions, this thesis follows the

more recent trend in management studies in being based on the principles of the social constructivist paradigm, which is a basic system of beliefs and worldview that guide the researcher, not only on methodological decisions but also ontologically and epistemologically (Guba & Lincoln 1994: 105). Ontology answers questions on 'what reality is like, the basic elements it contains' (Silverman 2010: 109) whereas the epistemology is defined as 'study of the criteria by which we can know what does and does not constitute warranted, or scientific knowledge' (Johnson & Duberley 2000: 2-3). According to Young and Collin (2004), constructivism addresses individuals and how they develop their knowledge and understanding based on social construction, whereby knowledge and meaning are historically and culturally constructed through social processes and action. Social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices (Wendt 1992: 73) and those are defined by shared understandings, expectations, or knowledge. According to constructivism, individuals build their realities through social interactions as part of their social entities. Constructivism is thus the direct opposite of objective ontology, according to which the researcher should keep a distance from the phenomenon under research and exclude all affecting factors (Bateson 1972). Following the constructivist view the main concepts of this study (subjective perceptions), are thus socially constructed and an outcome of social interactions and continuous change (Guba & Lincoln 1989, Gergen 1991, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). It is therefore important for us to understand how individuals interacting particularly with a culturally distant environment interpret and construct their own understanding and perceptions, and act upon those perceptions.

3.2 Research strategy

During the past decades there has been a clear change towards a more interpretative research paradigm that is, according to Cresswell (1994), more focused on problems related to holistic human and complex settings that are reported by the detailed views of the informants. The aim of this dissertation is also to enhance our understanding of the real experiences of western self-initiated expatriates within a real-life context (Yin 2014) in its natural settings, in a culturally and geographically distant career context, China, and help us to understand how and why western SIEs feel and act the way they do (Joubish, Khurram, Ahmad et al. 2011). Due to the emerging nature of the contextualised phenomenon and following the notions of Dyer and Wilkings (1991), Prasad and Prasad, (2002) and Ruddin (2006) this dissertation aims to enhance current understanding of the phenomena, and highlight the richness and uniqueness of

the surrounding context, rather than attempting to offer broadly applicable generalisations.

The qualitative research strategy was chosen based on beliefs of how realities are constructed. That strategy is also especially suitable for subjective and descriptive research on smaller samples (Saunders et al. 2009). Qualitative research is a form of research that does not have strong guidelines or procedures to be followed, and its means are changing and evolving over time. This method is particularly suitable if the research is trying to describe or evaluate a certain phenomenon that needs to be explored and does not have clear or easily identified variables. It is also a suitable means for explaining the behaviour of participants (Joubish et al. 2011).

However, as stated by Eckhardt 'engaging in qualitative business research in China has many challenges, with one of the most prominent being gaining a thorough cultural grounding in the lived experiences of the people under investigation' (Eckhardt 2004: 402-403). This challenge emphasises the general understanding of the local culture, which would enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, and provide grounds for interpreting the results with a proper cultural understanding (Eckhard 2004). Therefore, the means for tackling these issues are discussed in detail in the research quality section of this dissertation. However, the focus of the current dissertation is not on describing the Chinese career context objectively, but rather on subjective perceptions of how it feels from the western perspective. The shared cultural backgrounds of the informants and the author were not therefore perceived to be problematic.

Therefore, in the context of the constructivist paradigm, interviews were adjudged a suitable method to gather individual perceptions (Joubish et al. 2011) and allow the informants to express their views in their own terms, but at the same time interviews provide the freedom to follow new leads as they arise and to identify new ways of seeing and understanding the topic (Bernard 1988). Interviews are also suitable instruments in international and cross-cultural studies for obtaining highly personalised data with a good return rate (David & Sutton 2004: 214), when studying new relationships and situations that have not been previously studied, there is a relatively small population of informants available, and when there is an intention to develop a deep rapport (Daniels & Cannice 2004).

3.3 Research process

This dissertation applied a research process in which data collection and its analysis were interconnected, often overlapping and often occurred simultaneously (Saunders & Rojon 2014). Despite that fact and for the sake of transparency each section is presented and discussed as separate items.

3.3.1 Informant selection

Due to the subjective nature of the dissertation there was a need to find informants with personal experience of the research topic in a particular context, who could thus provide deep and rich explanations of the topic at hand (Prasad & Prasad 2002, Saunders 2012). Because the aim of this dissertation favours complexity, originality and specificity (van Maanen, Sörensson & Mitchell 2007) the selection of informants was based on purposive sampling (Bernard 1988; Neuman 2011). This method ensured that only informants who could provide information that would facilitate and improve our understanding of the issue at hand would be selected and interviewed (Saunders 2012). In addition to attempts to provide rich subjective and contextual insights into the topic, the aim was also to achieve the data saturation (Saunders 2012) and reach multiple informants (Yin 2009: 60) whose experiences would provide greater confidence on the findings (Yin 2012: 7). Due to difficulty of specifying the informants beforehand, all informants had to be found individually (Ragin 1992).

3.3.2 Data collection

The interviews were conducted in two phases that provided data for all three studies forming the foundation of the findings. The first interview round provided data for **Articles 1** and **3** presented in this dissertation. The search for its informants started with the author's single personal contact who had a history of working as an SIE in a local Chinese organisation. This contact was subsequently used to prime the purposive snowballing technique (Yin 2014) to find westerners with similar career experiences.

However, in order to enlarge the informant base, more potential informants were detected via the social media application, LinkedIn. This approach, due to the author's professional background, facilitated the use of a very large professional database, which proved an efficient means of locating western informants of various western nationalities in several parts of China (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong province) with a work experience as SIEs for local Chinese

organisations. Majority of informants worked in companies, which had a focus on telecom or ICT products/services in general management, product/service design or engineering positions. This approach had an aim of increasing the validity of the findings (Yin 2014). This approach was also perceived to yield the largest amount of potential informant candidates possible. Despite diligent attempts to locate more female SIEs, only two were found, which reflects the expected low proportion of women working as SIEs in male dominated local organisations in China (Simon & Cao 2009). For the first round of data collection fourteen informants were interviewed in person in China, and eight by Skype and one by telephone. Video calls via Skype provide a flexible and cost-efficient way of acquiring qualitative data and provide an equal level of authenticity as face-to-face interviews (Sullivan 2013). In comparison, telephone interviews do not provide this opportunity resulting in loss of contextual and nonverbal data and compromise rapport, probing, and interpretation of responses (Irvine 2011).

The second interview round was focused on serving the purpose of **Article 2** of this dissertation with its focus on the MNC subsidiary staffing in China. Again the author looked for potential informants from among her personal contacts. Despite the different search methods used for finding and identifying suitable informants, only those western informants with personal experience of western MNC subsidiary staffing in China were adjudged able to improve our understanding of the issue at hand (Saunders 2012). The selected informants were chosen for several reasons. First, because they usually represent the western HQ strategic staffing view in the subsidiary, and create and administer the staffing policies, thus acting as the gatekeepers for the jobs available in those subsidiaries. Second, for the western applicants they present the most likely contact point when approaching the western MNC subsidiaries in China. For westerners looking for jobs in China, it is far more difficult to contact local Chinese HR personnel, primarily simply because it is difficult to discover their contact information, but also due to cultural differences and other communication issues. Third, western HRM informants not only possess an understanding of the local staffing and the labour markets, but also have first-hand expatriate experience, an understanding of the challenges westerners face in such an environment, and how the cultural context feels. Fourth, their staffing experience in western MNCs, which are significant employment providers in China for all potential staffing groups, offers them a clear understanding of the characteristics of the different staffing groups available. Altogether twenty informants were interviewed for the purpose of **Article 2** by Skype or telephone, and four were interviewed in person in China.

During 2013–2014 a total of 47 informants were interviewed for the purpose of advancing this dissertation. Some of the informants contributed to only one sub-research question whereas some were able to contribute to two. Following the suggestion of Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004) the interviews adopted a language equality approach for those informants who used the same mother tongue as the author. For the other non-native English speakers, the mutual disadvantage approach was applied by using English in the interviews. The advantages of these approaches are the building of a good rapport with the informants, allowing respondents to express themselves fully, and to enable a cultural understanding of the respondents' statements.

All interviews followed a prepared checklist (see Articles 1, 2 and 3) to make sure that the interviews met the objectives and aims of the study (Saunders & Rojon 2014), although there was a conscious intention to adopt a non-linear research process that consisted of active interplay between the existing theory or frameworks, and the empirical findings. In other words, the theoretical frameworks evolved simultaneously with the gathering of empirical observations (Timmermans & Tavory 2012). Therefore, in order to ensure flexibility and responsiveness as well as opportunities to discuss themes or perceptions that could not be considered in advance (Huberman & Miles 2002), or those that had emerged from the interviews of other informants, the interviews followed a rather conversational format. The method involved asking the informants to share their career stories and to describe their experiences and feelings rather than answering open-ended questions in a strict order with an intention to provide insights into the research question (Saunders & Rojon 2014). Interviews were also planned not only to cover their background information, but also a wide range of research questions that would serve the purpose of the dissertation from different angles (see Articles 1, 2 and 3 for examples of questions). The approach prompted a considerable amount of probing as new issues emerged (Gray 2004, Saunders et al. 2009). For the same reason there was also a constant overlap of data analysis and data collection as proposed by Eisenhardt (1989) and Suddaby (2006). Interviews were recorded with the permission of the informants, saved on a cloud server and transcribed. The transcribing phase was also the initial stage of data analysis using an interpretative qualitative methodology (Bird 2005), which does not develop only thorough understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke 2013), but also provides a process in which initial meanings are created (Lapadat & Lindsay 1999).

3.3.3 Data analysis

The data analysis of all interviews of this study applied an interpretative approach with the aim of aiding practical understanding of the meanings and actions as suggested by Berg and Lune (2011). The assessment started with carefully reading all the transcribed data several times, although the initial assessment started straight after each interview, when the author both mentally and in the form of writing notes reflected on the data, and attempted to patterns by contrasting the interview with previous ones. This was done in order to be able to draw a 'more complete theoretical picture' as suggested by Eisenhardt (1991: 620). This dissertation thus applies the idea of systematic combining (Dubois & Gadde 2002, 2014) in which a researcher is 'constantly going back and forth from one type of research activity to another, and in between empirical observations and theory' (Dubois & Gadde 2002: 555) with an aim of matching the theory and reality (ibid). The abductive approach was perceived to be particularly suitable for the purpose of this dissertation due to its strength on helping discover new things rather than confirming existing theories (Dubois & Gadde 2014). This approach also meant the research questions evolved and matured over time. Eventually the original frameworks were used as tools for assessing the empirical findings in which 'the theory provides an initial stage for looking for the empirical evidence' as suggested by Ragin (1992: 218). In other words, the frameworks were refined 'through critical evaluation of emerging construct against ongoing observations' (Suddaby 2006: 636).

In all three articles, qualitative thematic (content) analysis was applied (see Mayring 2004, Braun & Clarke 2013). This method was chosen for its ability to identify, analyse and report on patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke 2013). It also allows for the interpretation of various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis 1998).

For Articles 1 and 3, the assessment of the data was first aided by NVivo10 software. The software was used for arranging and coding the transcripts by loosely following the chosen theoretical construct or framework that provided the starting point for arranging the categories or themes for the assessment. As new and additional categories (themes) or contextual conditions emerged that explained the phenomenon those were added allowing in-depth assessment of the data. Similarly, for Article 1 that aimed at illustrating the dynamic aspect of perceived employability, the significant events, contextual conditions and perceptions were arranged on a timeline. However, despite the benefits of software assisted thematic or framework assisted categorisation, the actual interpretative process proved difficult due to the data being provided in two

languages and was ultimately conducted manually, as for Article 2. This careful manual interpretation process (Riessman 2008) aimed to identify similar or distinctive patterns and themes (Saunders et al. 2009), typologies (Mayring 2002), or surprising and unexpected empirical findings (van Maanen et al. 2007), but also to contrast the empirical findings with the existing theories and framework together with the contextual conditions of the research setting, China. Due to the sensitive topics and very personal nature of interviews, the author did not focus only on what was explicitly said, but rather sought to understand the meaning of the stories and answers. This process aimed to encompass not only the words but also how those words could be understood, and what kind of meanings they have at the personal level (Geertz 1973: 27). This facilitated the presenting of rich and detailed descriptions of the observed phenomenon as well as taking into account the human actions and perceptions in the particular social context.

3.4 Research quality

Existing literature on qualitative research includes much criticism of the classic positivist research quality criteria (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1989, Mayring 2002). The critique stems from the difficulty in complying with such criteria due to the uniqueness of the data that cannot be repeated owing to the evolving nature of both subject and researcher (Dubois & Gedde 2014). Similarly, the positivist criterion is argued to be unsuitable for studies based on constructivist assumptions (Guba & Lincoln 1989) and hence the testability of the research is said to be a secondary consideration (Weick 1999).

However, in order to ensure the high level of quality of this dissertation the research quality is assessed by using the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability of Lincoln and Guba (1985). The aim of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the enquiry's findings are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 290). In the following passages each item of trustworthiness in relation to the current dissertation is discussed and elaborated by using the guidelines for qualitative research provided by Shenton (2004).

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that credibility is the most important condition for establishing trustworthiness focusing on the question 'how congruent are the findings with reality?' and 'do the findings capture what is really there?' (Merriam 1998). In the current dissertation, the credibility of the findings was ensured by considering the following issues:

The development of an early familiarity with the context. Due to the contextual nature of the dissertation and the novelty of China as a research setting (Eckhardt 2004), the acquired understanding of the Chinese, their culture and organisational behaviour was necessary to be able to build a more complete picture of the phenomena, as was suggested by Briggs (1986: 94). The author has over ten years of experience of working with the Chinese culture (for prolonged engagement, see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which involved dozens of lengthy business and personal trips to China between 2000 and 2015 both as a customer and as a service provider to Chinese customers, and being involved with the personal lives of expatriate co-workers in China. Despite this subjective knowledge and understanding, more academic knowledge was acquired during the research process. This was done by participating in advanced courses focused on the research done in China (*Doing fieldwork in China*, and *Localizing Theories* by Finnish University Network for Asia Studies arranged by University of Turku) as well as participation in the business training course focused on conducting business in China arranged by the Ministry of Foreign Trade of Finland. This course involved eight intensive lecture days on Chinese business culture, etiquette, legislation and business practicalities by Chinese and international business professionals as well as a 10-day fieldtrip to Hong Kong and China. The research process also involved familiarising myself with the literature on Chinese culture and organisational behaviour, and on both economic and technological development in China (e.g. Schwartz 1980, 2001, Simon & Cao 2009, Smith 2010, Huang & Bond 2012, Boncori 2013). I also conducted a thorough literature review of scientific articles on the business and expatriate studies in China. This background provided some basic understanding of the challenges and contextual conditions that could affect the experiences and perceptions of western expatriates in China. Similarly, the data collection phase spanning three lengthy visits to China involved familiarisation with the local organisational culture and expatriates' lives in China.

The adoption of well-established research methods. The current dissertation applied interviews as a research method, which were not only suitable for the purpose for capturing the subjective perceptions of the informants but were also well described in the literature. The data analysis of the interviews applied an interpretative approach to the qualitative thematic content analysis (Mayring 2004, Braun & Clarke 2013) with an aim of discovering practical understanding of the meanings and actions as suggested by Berg and Lune (2011). This approach was seen as appropriate for exploring the emerging phenomena in particular research context as suggested by Burrell and Morgan (1979).

Sampling of informants to serve the purpose of the study, and use of multiple sources of evidence. For each interview round the purposive sampling strategy was applied (Neuman, 2011). This means that only individuals with personal knowledge and experience of the phenomena in question were chosen. The sampling also sought to prevent the homogeneity of the dataset as suggested by Andresen and Skaates (2004) and avoid a nationality or location bias among the informants, thus providing multiple sources of evidence (informants) (Yin 2014). Therefore, a diverse range of informants offered different types of viewpoints that could be verified against each other and provided a 'rich picture of the attitudes, needs and behaviour of those under scrutiny' as suggested by Shenton (2004: 66). Informants also represented different (western) nationalities, several organisations in several locations in China, as well as the points of view of both employees and employers. This variety of informants intended to comply with Dervin's notion of 'the necessity of obtaining a variety of perspectives in order to get a better, more stable view of "reality" based on wide spectrum of observations' (Dervin 1983: 7).

Tactics to help ensure honesty of informants. Due to the sensitive nature of the enquiries (see Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen et al. 2007 on sensitivity) all informants were given an opportunity to refuse to participate or answer any uncomfortable questions. Also the purpose of the interviews was explained beforehand. All informants were invited to choose the interview spot and a time that would best suit their private and professional lives. Therefore all the face-to-face interviews were conducted in relaxed and comfortable surroundings, such as cafés, restaurants, private homes or hotel lobbies in China, to encourage open and honest responses to the questions (Saunders et al. 2009). Despite the sensitive topics, the informants seemed to be relaxed and willing to share their experiences. All informants were encouraged to frankly express their personal experiences and observations, not to reflect the perceptions of their employers. Due to the focus on subjective and informant related perspectives, they were able to participate in the interviews free from the gatekeepers (employers). Despite this free choice, some informants did express concerns potential negative career outcomes if their identities were revealed. For this reason, the personal information on the informants provided in the articles is not overly detailed.

Iterative questioning and member checks. Although each interview included some pre-established checklists on the topics to be covered, the informants were quite free to express their opinions and perceptions based on their experiences. Therefore, a lot of probing and iterative questioning was used in order to ensure that their intended meanings were interpreted correctly. Subsequently, all the informants were also asked to read and comment on the written transcripts of

the interviews (Riessman 2008), although none of them suggested any corrections. Another means of using member checks was to seek verification for the emerging themes and observations as suggested by Van Maanen (1983). Interviews often included asking for the reasons for particular patterns emerging from the empirical data.

Also the methods of *peer scrutiny of the research project* and *the researcher's reflective commentary* were used. The findings of each article were presented at international conferences and seminars at both national and university level to obtain constructive feedback on the methods and findings. All three articles were published or have been accepted for publication in well-established blind-peer reviewed scientific journals.

Transferability. Yin (2012) concluded that it is only the potential for replication that establishes that original findings are robust. However, any qualitative research in social sciences struggles to comply with that criterion due to the uniqueness of each research setting (Dubois & Gedde 2014). Against the request from the positivist research tradition, findings based on subjective qualitative studies on a relatively small group of informants are difficult to label applicable to other contexts and populations (Shenton 2004). Therefore, how transferable the findings are to the other settings is dependent on the richness of the descriptions of the phenomena (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 316, Malterud 2001: 484-485, Bryman & Bell 2011: 398). This dissertation targets rich and detailed, thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of the perceptions of westerners in a dynamic and culturally distant career context and also providing socially and culturally embedded meanings that consider both the western and the host-country cultural context. Therefore, the findings could be related to other similar career contexts (cultural contexts) or similar research groups (SIEs in such career contexts) as suggested by Shenton (2004) and the scope of claims could be considered moderate and thus open to change (Payne & Williams 2005).

Dependability. From the positivist point of view, dependability refers to the extent to which the techniques used in the research, if repeated in the same context and with the same informants, would produce similar findings (Shenton 2004). However, the changing nature of context and phenomena do provide issues for verifying such compliance. In the current dissertation each article discusses the research design and implementation of such methods as well as details of data gathering as openly as possible, as suggested in the literature (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

Confirmability. Confirmability in qualitative research aims to tackle the issue of objectivity and ensure that the 'findings are the result of the experiences and

ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher' (Shenton 2004). This means that research must be conducted in good faith without letting personal values influence the outcomes (Bryman & Bell 2011). This dissertation has highlighted and discussed the personal values and preconceptions of the author openly, but at the same time the author has actively sought to minimise their influence on the findings. The author has also attempted to ensure objectivity by actively examining the existing body of literature and findings, and contrasting those with the emerging ones as suggested in the literature (Silverman 2001). Similarly, and despite the complexity of the topic and difficulty in conveying the whole picture and interactions of the contextual conditions and the perceptions the findings are illustrated with examples and quotations to provide a deep and rich understanding of the majority of the opinions, or of an extreme case of the relevant topic (Saunders & Rojon 2013) and to provide an evidence pathway for the findings.

4 OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

Three sole-authored published articles comprise the current dissertation, each addressing different aspects of the careers of western SIEs in China. In the following the aims, main findings and contributions of each of these articles are presented. The complete articles in their published format are later presented in the second part of the dissertation.

4.1 Careers as resources: *'Perceived Employability Development of Western Self-Initiated Expatriates in China'*

The purpose of this article was to reveal the subjective perspectives on the development process of perceived employability among Western SIEs with work experience in local organisations in China. The assessment was facilitated by considering perceived employability as a personal resource – '(an) aspect of self, which helps an individual to control and impact the surrounding environment' (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis & Jackson 2003) – in accordance with Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory.

The study identified four distinctive perceived employability trajectories among SIEs (repatriated Consultants and Specialists; non-repatriated Westerners and Executives). Particularly SIEs with temporary or short-term focus on their employment had negative feelings and thus decreasing employability trajectories. Negative feelings (exploitation, competence erosion and stagnation) seemed to stem from perceptions of not being capable to conserve existing resources, and accumulate or invest in new resources that in turn would facilitate perceptions of increasing employability. SIEs with long career experience or a long-term focus, on the other hand, after the initial challenges connected to the host-country culture and language, seemed to be able to acquire contextual resources, long-term professional and personal relationships, and establish themselves as members of corporate in-groups. This process in turn seemed to provide corporate and co-worker support and facilitate the accumulation of resources that contribute to perceived employability. However, despite positive experiences, contextualised resources can also enhance feelings of alienation from the home country or of being trapped. Findings also illustrate how the perceived employability may appear very different from one career context to another.

This cross-cultural examination of perceived employability development among western SIEs in local organisations in China contributes by providing an alternative explanation for the negative perceptions often reported in SIE literature. This was done by recognising how resources, which contribute to the development of perceived employability, can either be acquired or lost as a result of the impact of the host-country culture. A cross-cultural examination of PE development could thus illustrate empirically how resources that contribute to perceived employability are value driven and defined by the environment in which perceived employability development takes place.

4.2 Careers as fit: '*Employer Perceptions of Self-Initiated Expatriate Employability in China: A Person-Environment Fit Perspective*'

The aim of this study was to explore a neglected aspect of careers of SIEs: the gatekeepers – the employer perspective on the employability of SIEs, and to enhance understanding of cross-cultural MNC subsidiary staffing in China. The study identified and contrasted different staffing groups and their fit from four fit perspectives: person to job, to groups, to organisation and to cultural context.

The findings of this study reveal a prevalent bipolarity among the staffing groups, those of Chinese and those with western backgrounds. The findings also illustrate how SIEs are not a homogenous group from the employer perspective, but rather consist of two different groups with distinctive fit profiles: *Newcomer Westerners* and *Localised Westerners*. The findings also pinpoint how despite their increasing numbers in global staffing, SIEs still present an underused and uncommon staffing alternative among the western MNC subsidiaries in China due to a perceived lack of fit to the demands of the context. Western SIEs are also seen as a risky and temporary staffing alternative, who are less likely to perform well, and will face difficulties that will not affect the other staffing groups available to recruit in China. These findings can help explain why SIEs report perceptions of being in a weaker position and having fewer development opportunities than their co-workers do.

This study makes two contributions. First it contributes to SIE literature by revealing the employer perspective on the employability and fit of SIEs. This helps us to understand and explain the careers of SIEs. And second, the study contributes to global staffing literature by contextualising and discussing staffing from the MNC subsidiary perspective in China.

4.3 Careers as actions: *'Career Self-Management Behaviour of Western Self-Initiated Expatriates in Local Organisations in China'*

This study shed light on how western self-initiated expatriates pursue a labour market fit with career self-management behaviour and why, particularly in labour markets and organisations that deviate from the western management paradigm, in local Chinese organisations in China. The findings illustrate how not only young, mobile and adventurous individuals are attracted by SIE careers, but as a result of 'Asianisation' and labour market fluctuations in the West, different types of employees increasingly seek career opportunities in emerging career contexts.

The findings reveal how the type of applied career self-management behaviour selected is dependent on motivation and career outcome expectations, and the expected personal level of control over an individual's work. Using King's framework of career self-management behaviour as a framework, this study identified three different approaches to career self-management: those with a labour market entry approach (a focus on entering a labour market or career establishment); an employability maintenance approach (a focus on remaining employable in between jobs or due to labour market fluctuations); and a career advancement approach. The findings illustrate how, contrary to expectations, not all SIEs are particularly self-managed or need to achieve a fit through self-management behaviour owing to the type of career motivation as a source of SIE assignment. The study also illustrates how not only the lack of contextual and language skills, but also contextual factors can be a source of severe frustration, and make it difficult to realise the expected career outcomes and require an accommodation of learned behaviour models.

The research contributes by illustrating how SIEs navigate and aim at taking personal responsibility over their careers by using the dynamic concept of career self-management behaviour in culturally distant labour markets and local organisations. The study also revealed the significance of third-party initiatives as a premise of self-initiated expatriation particularly in career contexts that would be difficult to approach through self-directed behaviour. Second, the study contributes to the career literature by discussion whether career self-management behaviour actually has an impact on employee mobility choices or career success.

5 DISCUSSION

This dissertation aims to enhance understanding of the career experiences and trajectories of western SIEs by considering their careers in terms of resources, fit and actions. This approach of focusing on these three metaphors added to the knowledge of how their careers are perceived and self-managed and sheds light on how these perspectives are interconnected. It also illustrates how careers cannot be explained from one perspective alone, and how there is a need for more holistic understanding encompassing the perspectives of both individual SIEs and their employers.

The current discussion section thus focuses on consolidating the findings of the three individual studies that comprise body of this dissertation. It explores how perceived employability development, person to environment fit, and career self-management behaviour provide three perspectives through which the careers of western SIEs are evaluated.

By considering SIE careers as a resource and a fit, this dissertation approached the topic by posing a question: *How are the careers of western SIEs in China perceived?* International career experiences have traditionally been expected to generate positive career opportunities and contribute to perceptions of high employability (Hall 2002, De Vos et al. 2011). Despite these positive expectations, this dissertation identified four SIE groups with distinctive perceived employability development trajectories during the course of their career experience in China, of which not all were positive. On the contrary, skilled western SIEs particularly held negative perceptions of their employability development as well as feelings of being exploited, trapped, or their skills being eroded. Western SIEs with little professional experience on the other hand, had more positive career experiences, as they were able to accumulate their professional KSAs, particularly at the beginning of their careers in China.

SIEs have also often been praised for their cross-cultural skills and local networks (Froese & Peltokorpi 2013), or high levels of cultural adjustment (Lo et al. 2012). These qualities are suggested to make them a cost effective substitute for other staffing groups, such as OEs (McKenna & Richardson 2007, Scullion et al. 2007, Peltokorpi and Froese 2012, Andresen et al. 2013), although opposing opinions have been expressed (Tharenou 2013). However, SIEs, regardless of their strengths, often feel their employee position is weaker than that of other staffing groups (Jokinen et al. 2008, Biemann & Andresen 2010, Howe-Walsh & Schyns 2010). These perceptions are also supported by the findings of this

dissertation. This dissertation, by exploring the empirical employer perspective in this dilemma, contributes by providing potential explanations for these negative perceptions.

The findings illustrate how SIEs, from the employer and staffing perspectives, are not one homogenous staffing group. Instead, there are two distinct groups based on their different levels of fit from four fit perspectives (fit to job, group, organisation and cultural context) (Dawis & Lofquist 1984, Edwards 1991, Judge & Ferris 1992, Kristof 1996, Van Vianen 2000, Dawis 2002, Van Vianen et al. 2004, Kristof-Brown & Guay 2011, Boone & Den Hartog 2011): those who are Newcomer Westerners with no or little previous experience of the context, and those Localised Westerners who may have already lived and worked in the host country for a considerable time. However, when considering any type of position from the MNC staffing perspective in China, Western SIEs also seem to present a challenging and even a risky staffing group for MNC subsidiary staffing. Reasons for such perceptions do not seem to stem only from the lack of fit to the host-country culture, language skills or the KSAs needed to work efficiently in the host country, but from an inability to cope with the typical Chinese organisational and business culture, typically based on long-term relationships and cultural traits (Hofstede 1984, 1991). These factors together with the fundamental characteristics of SIEs: the temporary and thus unpredictable nature of SIE careers in China, may not support the long-term strategic goals and needs of the organisations concerned. Instead, western SIEs increasingly find career opportunities within the local organisations in China with their focus still on short-term knowledge transfer and internationalisation. Despite this potential, and regardless of the length of prior professional work experience in China even in Chinese organisations, only a few westerners among the data set spoke Chinese at a level that would enhance their fit and facilitate smooth career progression in China in the future.

By considering SIE careers as actions, this dissertation approached the topic by posing a question: *How are SIE careers self-managed in China?* SIEs have also traditionally been described as young, well-educated and career driven individuals from the western world (Inkson et al. 1997, Doherty 2013, Tharenou 2013). They are also reported to choose their host countries based on their personal interest or perceived suitability of the host-country culture, or for lifestyle and adventure related reasons (Carr et al. 2005, Inkson 2005, Selmer & Laurant 2010, Doherty et al. 2011). They have also been defined as people able to choose the time of their repatriation (Suutari & Brewster 2000). The findings of this dissertation confirm how the many contributing SIEs could be described as individuals with such qualities. For them, temporary SIE assignments in China

provided a voluntary and timely opportunity to gain new experience and offered the potential to boost their employability upon repatriation. However, the findings of this dissertation identified an emerging number of western individuals who perceived to be forced to remain in China for a longer period than anticipated, and whose perceived employability was higher in China than in their home country. This was often due to their technology or industry specific skills that were no longer in demand at home (see Boncori 2013, Simon & Cao 2009). In other words, SIE employment is no longer only an employment option considered by mobile young talent looking for career development and adventure, but also a career option taken seriously by more mature professionals struggling to find appropriate employment at home.

SIE literature has traditionally been based on assumption that SIEs have protean (self-managed) careers (Hall 1996, Doherty et al. 2011), and take proactive measures to support their career development (Seibert et al. 2001, Inkson et al. 2012) and employability. However, the empirical findings of this dissertation illustrate how contrary to those assumptions (western) SIEs are not a homogenous group but comprise distinctive groups with distinct levels of the protean mind-set. Similarly, the findings illustrate how not all SIEs are particularly self-managed (cf. Inkson, et al. 1997, Suutari & Brewster 2000, Doherty et al. 2011,). There are young and mobile SIEs who are flexible and take the initiative for their personal careers and competence development by 'job-hopping' in China. On the other hand, there are individuals who may find it hard to self-directly manage their careers in China without the help of their employers.

From the contextual perspective, SIE studies been mainly focused on the SIEs in western career contexts, which has influenced the way we currently define and understand SIE careers (cf. Inkson et al. 1997, Suutari & Brewster 2000, Briscoe et al. 2009, Tharenou 2012, Doherty 2013). Hence, despite a recent increase in the body of SIE literature considering either developing or cross-cultural career contexts (Arp et al. 2013, Isakovic et al. 2013, Muir et al. 2014, Von Borell de Araujo et al. 2013, Peltokorpi & Froese 2014, Rodriguez & Scurry 2014) there is clearly a need to revisit the careers of western expatriates in emerging and developing career contexts such as in China (see Tharenou 2015), which are increasing in importance.

Hence, by assessing the careers of western SIEs *in a particular context*, the findings illustrate how such SIEs in China are affected by the social structures and contextual conditions of the host country as well as the boundaries created by various gatekeepers. The findings also suggest that the utilisation of a particular main (but not sole) self-management behaviour type (positioning,

influencing and boundary management career self-management strategies in King (2004)) is connected to initial expatriation motivations and the expected assignment outcomes of SIEs. The current dissertation identified three distinct approaches to SIE career self-management behaviour: a labour market entry approach aiming to enter into labour markets or a specific career; an employability maintenance approach between jobs, or to deal with challenging labour market fluctuations; and a career advancement approach intended to advance and develop the career. At the same time the empirical findings of this dissertation underline how SIEs may change their career self-management behaviour as suggested to serve the purpose of their career needs and accommodation in the literature (Doherty 2013; Piaget 1952).

Although the context (China) was not the main focus of this dissertation, the findings do illustrate how a context has an impact on how individuals SIEs perceive and interpret their careers, and how they may or may not be able to behave and possibly alter their career self-management behaviour in order to fit the requirements of the context. Contextual factors do also seem to influence the level of personal agency individuals are able to exert over their careers. In a familiar career context, individuals may appear protean, but in a career context that requires new language skills, cultural understanding and local networks, the means of undertaking such behaviour may be limited or restricted.

The findings also illustrate how the parameters of employability and fit are culture related. Supported by the employer perceptions of fit, the empirical evidence of this dissertation illustrates how perceptions of fit and employability are not only culture bound (Schneider 2001), but can be interpreted differently depending on the career context, this finding supports the empirical findings of Chuang et al. (2015).

5.1 Contributions of the dissertation

5.1.1 Theoretical contributions

This dissertation contributed by providing insights into SIE careers from two perspectives: the perceptions of individual SIEs and those of their MNC employers. The majority of SIE studies, particularly in cross-cultural career settings, are focused on subjective SIE career experiences (e.g., Al Ariss and Özbilgin 2010, Isakovic et al. 2013, Von Borell de Araujo et al. 2013, Luring & Selmer 2014, Muir et al. 2014, Rodriguez & Scurry 2014). The employer perspective adds to our understanding of SIE careers and how they are seen in

comparison to other staffing groups. This helps us to build a more complete picture of SIEs, their characteristics, and their careers.

In considering SIE careers as resources this dissertation contributed to our current understanding of the careers of self-initiated expatriates and the development of their perceived employability. The existing employability models suggest a universalist perspective and remain silent about national specificities. By illustrating the dynamic and contextual nature of perceived employability, this dissertation was one of the first to examine the long-term development of perceived employability in international and cross-cultural career settings. In presenting Hobfoll's (1989, 2001, 2002, 2011,) conservation of resources theory, the current study was also one of the first to underline how the culture of the host country has an impact on how the personal resources that contribute to perceived employability are either acquired or lost. The findings also confirm the remarks of Schneider (2001) and Chuang et al. (2015) how fit and employability are consequently culture bound and may be interpreted different depending on the career context. This understanding is not only theoretically significant, but also increasingly relevant not only for increasing number of SIEs who independently seek career opportunities in cross-cultural career and labour market settings, but also for employers seeking international talent.

By considering SIE careers in terms of fit the current dissertation contributes to staffing literature by contextualising staffing and incorporating the neglected employer perspective into the study of SIEs. The findings of this dissertation reveal levels of fit under four different fit perspectives and thus illustrate how MNCs in China see the fit of different staffing groups, and why one staffing group can be perceived as better for a particular strategic concern than another (see Tarique et al. 2006). From the SIE literature perspective the current dissertation illustrates how SIEs, from the staffing perspective, are not a homogenous group, but comprise two different groups – Newcomer Westerners and Localised Westerners – with distinctive fit profiles that define their value for the employers in a particular career setting. These contextualised fit profiles help explain why SIEs consider themselves in a weaker position or as having fewer development opportunities during their employment (Biemann & Andresen 2010) than their co-workers do.

Literature relating to SIEs is often based on the assumption of their being protean (e.g., Doherty et al. 2013, Suutari et al. 2013) and being able to select and pursue their careers and career trajectories (Pringle & Mallon 2003, Inkson, et al. 2012) without being constrained by the influence of the social context. By considering SIE careers as actions, the current dissertation contributes by

illustrating how, contrary to the prevalent assumption (Milio, Lattanzi, Casadio et al. 2012), the content of self-initiated expatriation cannot always be influenced by career self-management behaviour, and how the tenure of expatriation does not stem from the free choice of individuals, or how all SIEs cannot choose the timing of their repatriation (cf. Suutari & Brewster 2000, Tharenou & Caulfield 2010).

This dissertation also contributes by illustrating how the application of the chosen career self-management behaviour strategy is related to the career outcome expectations of the assignment. Moreover, the dissertation contributes to our general understanding of career self-management by illustrating how there are no universally applicable best practices, but that behaviour has to be adapted to fit the social structures and local behaviour models of the host country. The results of this study support the suggestion of Forrier, Sels and Stynen (2009) that mere willingness or a general protean attitude alone do not make boundaryless careers a reality, but that strategic mobility decisions and career outcomes are often subject to the influence of multiple gatekeepers in the career context.

Finally from the contextualised research perspective, the findings of the current dissertation illustrate how the impacts of cross-cultural phenomena should not be ignored. The findings confirm how the cross-cultural differences between individuals and organisations affect how the perceived employability, fit and means of managing the career are perceived, valued and influenced.

5.1.2 Practical implications

The findings of this dissertation have practical implications both for individual SIEs and for their employers. For individual SIEs this dissertation illustrates how and why such workers should be prepared not only to consider positive career outcomes but also potential career risks (Tharenou 2010, Hamori and Koyuncu 2011, Rodriguez and Scurry 2014) and personal challenges (see Arp et al. 2013, Isakovic et al. 2013, Von Borell de Araujo et al. 2013, Luring & Selmer 2014, Muir et al. 2014, Rodriguez & Scurry 2014). These risks may include the perceptions of decreasing employability and an employability trap that might manifest in the form of a growing alienation from other career contexts, and can thus hinder returning home at a specific time, or finding employment when industries are being restructured.

Understanding the potential for such negative perceptions, for example from the perspective of the dynamics of the gain and loss spirals of resources (Gorgievski

& Hobfoll 2008) that contribute to the perceived employability development (De Cuyper et al. 2012, Kirves et al. 2014), is increasingly relevant for the increasing number of SIEs who independently seek career opportunities in cross-cultural career and labour market settings with limited cultural understanding of the host country and its language (Ng et al. 2009, Luring & Selmer 2011, Peltokorpi & Clausen 2011).

At a practical level, the challenges westerners experience in China can stem from stringent immigration and residency policies that aim to limit the number of 'excess foreigners' in the country (Pieke 2012). This intends to limit the supply of low talent foreigners looking for employment in China. Finding employment is also affected by an increasing number of ambitious locals with high or increasing levels of fit in all four fit categories. This new source of talent is increasingly seen by recruiters as suitable to meet the demands of the focus shifts and localisation trends that are influencing corporate strategy (Worm, Selmer & De Leon 2001, Fryxell et al. 2004, Hartmann, Feisel & Schober 2010). Consequently, the demand for westerners is decreasing (Brookfield 2015).

For individual SIEs looking for employment, the current dissertation illustrates the latest ways available to find international work and establish careers through utilising social media and third-party initiation. However, from the practical perspective, the findings also illustrate how MNC staffing is culturally bound, and why staffing decisions are not based merely on job-related qualifications or past experience (Aycaan 2005) but are more often driven by the requirements of the job, organisation, group, and the cultural context as a whole. This confirms how different staffing groups can be seen as having different levels of employability in a particular context, and why one staffing group might be considered better suited to a particular strategic concern than another (cf. Tarique, Schuller & Gong 2006). Consequently, western SIEs in China can be seen as a problematic, temporary and risky staffing group who are less likely to perform well, and might be expected to encounter difficulties in working efficiently with local co-workers, superiors, or in the challenging cultural context as a whole. From the practical point of view, this finding may help explain the perceptions on the part of SIEs that they are sometimes underemployed (Lee 2005). The current research also clarifies that in practice SIEs are seldom considered an option for top managerial positions reserved for trusted OEs, a finding that counters the suggestion that SIEs can be a cheap and effective alternative for costly OEs (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009), supporting the suggestion of Tharenou (2013).

This dissertation also illustrates how contemporary careers are becoming increasingly unpredictable. Industries once perceived to provide a stable living

and career development can suddenly vanish or be removed to geographically distant locations. The dissertation also illustrates, borrowing from Muchinsky and Monahan (1987), how feelings of a good fit (or employability) today do not predict the state of such a perception in the future, because the perception is dependent on the stability of the different contextual attributes. This means that particularly individuals with little access to organizational support – SIEs and other temporary employees – have a greater need to apply career self management behaviour and to proactively search out career opportunities. In practice, this means an enhanced need for managing their skills portfolio, pursuing a fit within the particular career context, and proactive influencing all relevant gatekeepers. Such actions act as intentional initiatives to avoid the employability trap.

Considering the employers' perspective, this study illustrates the variety of different staffing alternatives available and the employability of some of those groups of people in China. Drawing from the findings of this dissertation there is a question of whether MNCs should encourage or tolerate SIEs? However, there is no question that there is a need to develop HRM practices capable of meeting the demands of all staffing groups. Therefore, the identification of different staffing groups and their specific characteristics, combined with the use of an extended person to environment fit perspective in staffing, provide tools not only to recognise suitable candidates for different types of positions, but also to develop HRM practices that could help to both motivate and retain them. However, the findings of this dissertation interestingly highlight how despite the increasing numbers of SIEs working worldwide (Jokinen et al. 2008, Peltokorpi & Froese, 2012) they still remain an underused staffing alternative among the western MNCs in China. Instead of considering SIEs as a risk, organisations in emerging markets could take greater advantage of SIEs as an increasing pool of talent and, and aim to foster positive interactions between SIEs and the rest of the organisation. Such organisations could provide supervisory support and development opportunities, that according to the main principles of COR theory (Hobfoll 1989, 2001), should lead to mutual gain spirals for both parties and the potential for the resources of SIEs to be linked to the gains and strengths of teams or organisations as a whole.

Overall, the findings of this dissertation illustrate how neither individuals or organisations operate in a vacuum. The current research also sheds light on how careers can be viewed from the resource, fit and action perspectives. It also pinpoints how our perceptions of perceived fit and employability evolve over time and may appear different from one context to another, meaning that how the fit and employability of an employee is perceived today may not apply tomorrow.

Similarly, how we should and can respond to the requirements of an environment by applying career self-management behaviour, should alter dynamically from one career context to another. An ideal candidate could therefore be profiled as an individual who is able to comply with corporate goals and strategies, develop his or her embeddedness in the company, and moreover work in accordance with corporate ethics and values, while respecting the host-country culture. Therefore, such a candidate should constantly evaluate the efficiency and suitability of his or her career self-management behaviour, fit and employability and value to employers.

5.2 Limitations and directions for future research

The current dissertation purposefully highlights the mono-dimensional approach of subjective perceptions of westerners (both individual SIEs and individuals responsible for MNC staffing) in the Chinese cultural context. Like any subjective experience or opinion, these findings offer insights into specific contexts and thus cannot be generalised to other contexts as such, although the background phenomena may be shared. However, the findings do provide interesting paths for other indigenous research to explore the phenomena in other contexts. Similarly turning the cultural dimensions around, by for example focusing on Asian SIEs in western career and cultural contexts, or any minority group such as the Japanese in China, would provide a wider perspective on the theoretical concept of SIEs.

Following the thoughts of Dickson-Swift et al. (2007: 327), the sensitive nature of the topics 'outlined the importance of protecting participants and possible consequences of the research upon their lives'. Quite often during the interview sessions the lack of a relationship with the researcher seemed to make it easier for the informants to open up and disclose private issues and aspects of their careers (Brannen 1988), which may not have been discussed previously. The phenomenon was akin to opening Pandora's box, as Ramos (1989) described it. Owing to ethical considerations, the current dissertation does not offer detailed descriptions of the informants who participated and thus may not provide clearly defined boundaries of the sample (Yin 2014). Similarly, following the idea of qualitative analysis of being 'a personal process' that reflects the personal styles of the researcher (Smith & Osborn 2008: 67) there remains grounds for discussion over the validity of the interpretations over the sensitive and subjective perceptions (Riesmann 2008). In the interpretation process the author did not focus only on what was explicitly said, but instead on understanding the meaning of the stories and answers. The process was intended to consider not

only the words but also how those words might be understood, and what kind of meanings could be ascribed to them at the personal level (Geertz 1973: 27). It is therefore essential to underline that the categories and typologies presented as part of this dissertation are not the only possible ways of representing the SIE careers in culturally distant career contexts, but represent only one aspect of the phenomena. Accordingly, the findings cannot be generalised to illuminate situations in other contexts.

In a similar way, due to the subjective nature of the retrospective self-reflection of the informants, it would be worth exploring just how objective are the perceptions that seem to have such severe consequences on their personal lives. More longitudinal studies on the careers of repatriated workers and those who chose not to repatriate might hence help understand how to facilitate a smooth repatriation for those SIEs with perceptions of low employability at home and of being trapped. Or in which ways is employability and its development impacted by the circumstance of showing personal initiative when going abroad. This study also contributed to the understanding of the development of a theoretical construct of perceived employability in international and cross-cultural career settings. Despite its limitations, the enhanced understanding of perceived employability development in cross-cultural career settings may benefit studies on migration, culture and issue of simply being a foreigner, for example. This study may be one of the first to open such research paths, and the complexity and multidimensional nature of the topic certainly merits further empirical and longitudinal research.

As a reflection of the metaphors used in this dissertation, exploration of SIE careers from other metaphorical perspective would be welcome. Other issues also merit more attention, including how well the perceptions of SIEs reflect the objective reality of their employability; how perceived employability develops for those SIEs who felt trapped when abroad after their eventual repatriation; and how stable or durable are the reported perceptions. Or how have the career trajectories of those who decided to stay in China unfolded? Could these career trajectories perhaps be examined from the brain drain perspective (Rapoport 2002, Carr et al. 2005, Milio et al. 2012), at which point do they consider themselves as immigrants, what kind of career shifts to they experience, and what are the perceived long-term (career) consequences of such decisions?

Additionally, spouses of repatriated western SIEs who the SIEs originally met when working abroad are an essential part of the SIEs' private lives, so exploring their career (and life) stories could enhance understanding of the barriers to repatriation. Approaching the topics from the staffing literature perspective, the

findings revealed the need for an updated taxonomy of staffing groups (cf. Perlmutter 1969, Wind, Douglas & Perlmutter 1973) that would also take into account the differences between the career orientations and employability of staffing groups.

Other significant limitations are the sample size, which limit the generalizability of the findings, and the absence of women, which however seems to reflect the number of women as expatriates in China (Simon & Cao 2009, Leung 2012, Brookfield 2015). There is evidently potential for further studies on the role of gender in new types of cross-cultural career contexts in local organisations. This strongly contextualised study also could not address the effect of the type, location or the ownership of the local organisation, although those aspects would undoubtedly be significant factors in an assessment of the career experiences of westerners (cf. Simon & Cao 2009). This limitation might provide an interesting avenue for further investigation of the topic. Similarly, the phenomena of the employability dilemma and trap presented in this dissertation that may apply to other industry sectors, which have faced severe global restructuring as well, offer great potential for further exploration. The findings therefore point to a need for structures and practices that would enhance the SIEs' perceived return on (self-initiated) expatriation investment (see Becker 1993, McNulty & Inkson 2013), and facilitate the circulation of human capital.

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Perceived employability development of Western self-initiated expatriates in local organisations in China

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reveal the subjective perspectives on the development process of perceived employability (PE) among Western self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) working for a local organisation in China.

Design/methodology/approach – This empirical qualitative study is based on 23 in-depth interviews of Western SIEs, both repatriated and those who seek to continue their careers in local Chinese organisations in China.

Findings – This study adds to the current understanding of PE development by highlighting how the long-term PE development of Western SIEs is not only impacted by the perceptions of lost and acquired resources, but also by the host-country cultural context, which contribute to the levels and development of PE as a personal resource.

Practical implications – The findings of the study are highly relevant because today's labour markets and the employability of skilled professionals are increasingly shaped by international career contexts. These are also emerging number of individuals who independently seek career opportunities in cross-cultural career and labour market settings. The findings also help explain why SIEs in cross-cultural career settings often express negative feelings when asked to review their assignments.

Originality/value – This study is one of the first to explore the career trajectories of Western SIEs, and to address the dynamic aspect of PE from the perspectives of the conservation of resources theory and non-local employees in cross-cultural career settings.

Keywords China, Perceived employability, Self-initiated expatriates, COR theory

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Introduction

For many employees a feeling of insecurity has become commonplace. While developed Western economies have difficulties to cope with high rates of redundancy among skilled employees, developing economies struggle to progress because of a lack of such talent (Sheldon and Li, 2013). This dilemma of the unbalanced location of labour supply and demand has created a push effect in the west particularly affecting those mobile individuals who cannot find suitable employment in the industry sector they have been trained for or worked in. This notion seems to be particularly applicable in industry sectors such as IT, textiles, and consumer electronics (CE), the industry sector in focus in this study, which has a recent history of what has been termed “Asianisation” (Simon and Cao, 2009). As a result, there is an increasing number of (Western) individuals who “self-initiate their international relocation, with the intention of regular employment and a temporary stay” (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014, p. 1293) in a cross-cultural career settings like local organisations in China (Makkonen, 2015a, b). These individuals are called self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) in the literature.

Expatriate careers are expected to produce positive career outcomes (Shaffer et al., 2012) but SIE careers in cross-cultural career settings are often reported to have the opposite outcome (e.g. Muir et al., 2014; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014; Makkonen, 2015a) and consequently cause low or decreasing levels of perceived employability (PE). This empirical qualitative study is thus focused on exploring the subjective perspectives (Mäkikangas et al., 2013; Kirves et al., 2014), on the development process of PE among Western SIEs in cross-cultural career settings. PE is a theoretical construct that describes an individual’s perceived ability to find similar or better work in the future with the same or another employer (Wittekind et al., 2010). There are a number of studies discussing the various antecedents of employability (e.g. Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Forrier and Sels, 2003; Fugate et al., 2004; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006; Wittekind et al., 2010) and how those interact with each other (e.g. Berntson et al., 2008; Forrier et al., 2009; De Cuyper et al., 2012). Despite its reported significance to an individual’s health, mental well-being, and general life and job satisfaction (De Cuyper et al., 2008; Kirves et al., 2013), there is little literature addressing the process of its long-term development (exceptions include Berntson et al., 2008; De Cuyper et al., 2012; Kirves et al., 2014; Mäkikangas et al., 2013) and none in cross-cultural career settings. This understanding is increasingly relevant because today’s labour markets and the employability of skilled professionals are progressively shaped by international and cross-cultural career contexts. Moreover understanding the dynamics of PE

development is particularly relevant for an increasing number of SIEs (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2013, 2014) who, often without the help or support of an employing organisation, take sole responsibility for the accumulation of their career capital (Jokinen et al., 2008) and managing their careers (Makkonen, 2015a). Although today they represent a significant mobile global staffing alternative (Tharenou, 2013; Makkonen, 2015b), SIEs as an employee group may be forced to make their career decisions based only on their own judgement over their employability rather than any objective reality (Berntson et al., 2006). The study therefore focuses on the research question:

RQ1. How does the PE of Western SIEs develop in a cross-cultural career context, and why does it appear so?

By considering PE as a personal resource – “(an) aspect of self, which helps an individual to control and impact the surrounding environment” (Hobfoll et al., 2003) – following the emerging body of PE development literature (e.g. De Cuyper et al., 2012; Kirves et al. 2014) – this study recognises how resources that contribute to the development of PE can either be acquired or lost as a result of the impact of the host- country culture. This interaction may consequently manifest as increased or decreased perceptions of PE (Kirves et al., 2014). A cross-cultural examination of longer-term PE development could thus illustrate empirically how gains and losses, or the value of other resources that contribute to perceived levels of employability are defined and affected by the environment (cultural context) in which PE development occurs.

Therefore this study focuses on Western SIEs in local Chinese organisations in China because their experiences can contribute to the assessment of PE development among expatriates in a cross-cultural career setting for several reasons. First, SIEs not only represent an increasingly significant global staffing group of mobile talent (Jokinen et al., 2008; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2013), but they are also a theoretically important example of an emerging group of self-directed Westerners working in cross-cultural career settings.

Second, despite increasing Western influence, China is still regarded as the most demanding (Brookfield, 2014) and culturally unique career context (Boncori, 2013; Leung et al., 2011; Muir et al., 2014; Selmer 2005, 2006; Selmer et al., 2009) for Westerners to operate in. Challenges are reported to stem from China’s contextual features such as the socialist political regime, collectivist culture, high power distance, and high-context communications (Lyles et al., 2014). Therefore, wholly Chinese owned and managed local organisations operating in China offer an emerging, theoretically rich, under-studied, but increasingly economically important (Lyles et al., 2014) cross-cultural career

setting (see Arp et al., 2013; Makkonen, 2015a) to study PE development among Western SIEs. This choice of contextualisation was also based on an idea that “deep contextualization is necessary for both theory development and for the meaningful application of existing theory to novel contexts” (Tsui, 2007, p. 1357).

The current research provides contribution to PE and SIE literatures. First, it contributes to PE literature by being the one of the first to expand our existing understanding of the theoretical construct of PE and its long-term development among (self-initiated) expatriates in cross-cultural career settings. This is done by taking the cultural elements of the career context into consideration and examining the development of PE from the perspective of non-local employees in cross-cultural career settings. The current study hence illustrates the impact of a host-country culture in two ways. First, it pinpoints how personal compliance (or non-compliance) with the host-country culture influences how personal resources can be either acquired or lost, and therefore how personal compliance affects the dynamic development aspect of PE. Second, it empirically explores how the value of each resource is culturally defined and contributes to rises or falls in PE. From the SIE literature perspective, this study contributes by illustrating how SIEs see the development of their PE, and how PE development trajectories are affected by the cultural settings of their host country, particularly in more challenging career contexts (cf. Tharenou, 2013). The findings of this study may also help us explaining the negative career outcome experiences reported in the literature.

The study starts with a review of the literature on the concepts of SIEs and PE from the perspective of conservation of resources (COR) theory. This is followed by a review of the study context of China that will provide background information to help explain the PE development of Western SIEs in local organisations in China. After the presentation of the findings and the discussion section, the study addresses its practical implications and limitations, and finally offers suggestions for further research.

Literature review

PE as a personal resource, and its development

PE is a theoretical construct that has been found to be significant to an individual’s personal health, mental well-being, and general life satisfaction that in turn have been linked to job satisfaction, job engagement (De Cuyper et al., 2008), job insecurity, and an individual’s career management behaviour (Kirves,

2014). PE has also been described as “a form of work-specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realise career opportunities” (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 3), forming a base for perceptions upon which individuals act (Berntson et al., 2006). Moreover, following the emerging body of PE development literature (De Cuyper et al., 2012; Kirves et al., 2014) based on Hobfoll’s (1989, 2001, 2002) COR theory, this study also considers PE to be a personal resource, a set of personal characteristics and skills, which helps an individual to control and impact the surrounding environment (Hobfoll et al., 2003). Other thematic categories of resources according to COR theory are objective resources (e.g. money, housing), condition resources (e.g. relationships, the job, being embedded in supportive social networks) and energy resources (e.g. time) (Hobfoll and Lilly, 1993).

The most important personal resources that have been found to contribute to PE are job-related knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) and demographics (Rothwell and Arnold, 2007; Wittekind et al., 2010). Others have been connected to a person’s ability to find employment combined with professional networks (Fugate et al., 2004), labour market knowledge, job-seeking skills, perceived mobility (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007; Wittekind et al., 2010; Kirves et al., 2013), and self-managed behaviour (Clarke, 2009). In addition, the ability to respond effectively to changing circumstances or the willingness to develop new competencies or to change jobs (Wittekind et al., 2010) have been seen as important resources. Nevertheless, work experience in a single industry sector has been reported as causing issues adapting to work in a different sector (Weick and Berlinger, 1989). While personal resources are important, there are also context-related attributes (Nazar and van der Heijden, 2012) that cannot be affected by altering personal KSAs or behaviour. Research has addressed the impacts of global economics, the state of industry (Berntson et al., 2006), the type and role of the employing organisation in supporting personal career development (De Vos et al., 2011), and the content of employment agreements (Kirves et al., 2013).

Although employees are often quite good at estimating their present employability (Van der Heijden, 2000), it is important to recognise that PE is not a stable construct but one that evolves dynamically over time (Kirves et al., 2014; De Cuyper et al., 2012; Mäkikangas et al., 2013) as resources that contribute to its development are either acquired or lost (Hobfoll, 2011), or if contextual conditions change (Forrier and Sels, 2003). According to COR theory, losses and gains of personal resources in the form of employability-related dispositions and competences (Berntson et al., 2006; Wittekind et al., 2010) result in losses and gains of other personal resources. This interaction may appear as spirals of

gained or lost resources, or as “resource caravans” (Hobfoll, 2011). Resource losses are typically connected to negative feelings and as such are more salient than resource gains in that they have stronger motivational power. Following this logic, loss spirals develop more quickly than gains spirals. Therefore, individuals must be focused on conserving existing resources and must invest in acquiring new ones. This process protects individuals against negative career outcomes and helps to accumulate new resources, which in turn may have positive effects on other resources, like PE (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008; Hobfoll, 2002).

This dynamic element of PE directs attention not only to the level of perceptions (low vs high) but also to the development aspect (stable, decreasing, or increasing) (Mroczek et al., 2006). For example, individuals in involuntary temporary jobs with limited career or development opportunities may perceive they are being exploited (Gherardi and Murgia, 2012) and thus have perceptions of decreasing employability; or employees in failing industries may start to perceive themselves as less worthy than those in successful ones (Wittekind et al., 2010). In such cases, employees with low PE may even feel themselves trapped in their current jobs (Kirves et al., 2014). Therefore it is crucial to realise how people with resources are parts of larger systems, including their social environments, in which all parts of the system influence the resources at the individual level. Therefore the value of each resource is always contextually defined, and “depends on the social environment that surrounds us” (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008, p. 4). Despite the recognised importance of understanding the dynamics aspect of PE, according to a recent study on the PE development trajectories of Finnish university students (Kirves et al., 2014), only three other studies have focused on the long-term development of PE (see Berntson et al., 2008; De Cuyppers et al., 2012; Mäkikangas et al., 2013). This claim is also consistent with the results of the literature review carried out during the current research. However none of the studies explored the development aspect of PE in a cross-cultural career setting that would explain how PE might appear for those on self-directed international assignments.

Figure 1 illustrates the summary of the literature review and the dynamics of PE development from a COR perspective.

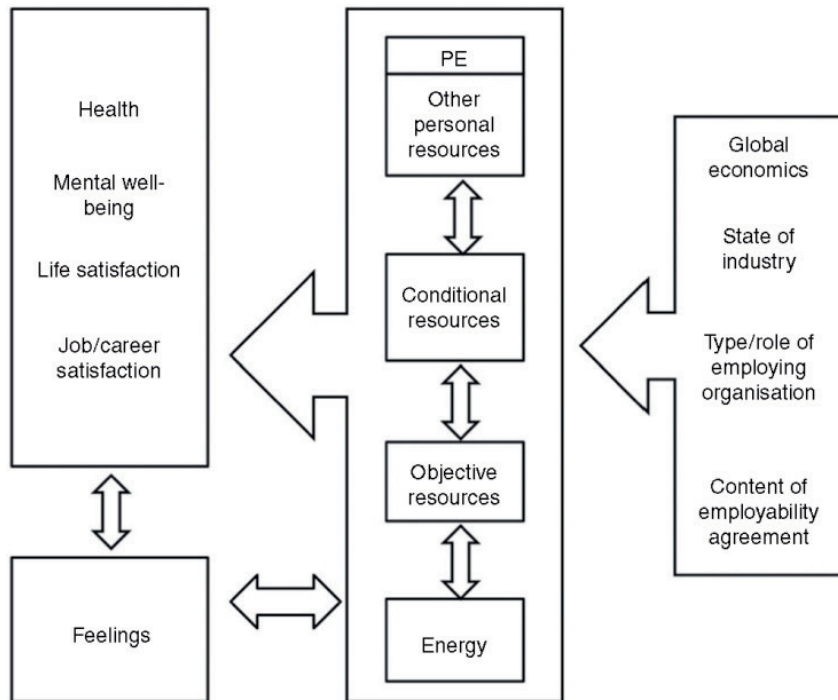


Figure 1. Summary of the literature review and the dynamics of PE development from the COR perspective

Self-initiated expatriates and employability

The research tradition on SIEs is based on a study of students by Inkson et al. (1997) that was later expanded to cover expatriate careers by Suutari and Brewster (2000). The growing literature on SIEs has explored the motives for expatriation (Carr et al., 2005; Selmer and Luring, 2010), adjustment (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2013), career anchors (Cerdin and Pargneux, 2010), and gender and family (Tharenou, 2010; Carr et al., 2005). Recently there has also been lively discussion over the definitions and the sub-groups of SIEs in comparison to other expatriate types (Doherty et al., 2013; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014) as well as other types of international careers such as frequent flyers and short-term assignees (Collings et al., 2007), termed “flexpatriates” (Mayerhofer et al., 2004), and a range of other business travellers (Welch et al., 2007). SIEs often differ from these groups because of their intention to settle down in the host country, even if only for a limited period. They may also sometimes receive host organisation support for travel or settlement, but most often they do not have a clear career plan upon repatriation that would ease the process of coming home. Accordingly, SIEs continue their careers abroad more often than do other expatriates

(Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Literature has also incorporated the implications of the growing SIE population for corporate HRM strategies as well as for individual career planning (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010).

Although SIE assignments have been connected to positive career outcomes (Hall, 2002; Jokinen et al., 2008; De Vos et al., 2011), international assignments particularly in cross-cultural career settings have also been reported to have conflicting outcomes (Tharenou, 2010; Hamori and Koyuncu, 2011; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014). The challenges have most often been connected to perceptions of limited organisational support and development opportunities in the host organisation (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010), and cultural understanding and language skills (Peltokorpi and Clausen, 2011; Luring and Selmer, 2011) or with challenges arising upon repatriation (Begley et al., 2008; Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010). Although SIE studies cover a wide spectrum of that group's careers, studies focusing on the development of their PE or their actual employability have not been identified.

China as a career context for Western SIEs

Research on SIEs has traditionally focused on their careers in Western countries that have provided "easy" or less challenging career contexts (Tharenou, 2013) for the mobile Western expatriates. Recently there has been a clear shift towards contextualised studies involving developing or culturally distant contexts (e.g. Arp et al., 2013; Isakovic et al., 2013; Von Borell de Araujo et al., 2013; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2014; Muir et al., 2014; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014). These emerging career contexts seem to provide new career opportunities and roles for Westerners capable of being mobile that are often connected, but not limited to their ethnic origin, specific KSAs in short supply, and the ability to offer knowledge transfer (Simon and Cao, 2009; Boncori, 2013; Arp et al., 2013).

Although China has often been referred to as the most challenging expatriation location for Westerners to comprehend and work efficiently in (Lassere and Ching, 1997; Selmer and Luring, 2010) owing to its cultural unfamiliarity and complex languages (Selmer, 2005, 2006; Luring and Selmer, 2010), it is also the largest and fastest expanding labour market in the world (Brookfield, 2014). It has increasingly been providing career opportunities for Westerners and is thus worth exploring. The challenges are often explained by reference to three fundamental Chinese elements that intermingle in all aspects of life, both professional and personal: collectivism, high power distance, and uncertainty avoidance (Leung, 2012) that differ from the culture typical in Western countries (Hofstede, 1984).

Collectivism manifests as a natural preference for maintaining long-term social and business relationships with the people who share the same guanxi. Guanxi is a social construct of in-group members based on shared values and strong relationships, and is difficult for a foreigner to penetrate. The principle aims at ensuring instrumental prosperity among members of the guanxi, and only among them (Leung, 2012). Chinese organisational behaviour and thus also the management systems applied are based on the group membership. Therefore expatriates, particularly those who are not considered Executives, are usually categorised as out-group members, and particularly if the expatriate is not highly ranked in the organisation, receive far less social or professional support from local co-workers or superiors than they might expect, (Varma et al., 2011). Expatriates may be the target of local frustration and negative attitudes caused by perceptions of unequal treatment, and compensation and lifestyle gaps between the Westerners and the locals (Leung et al., 2011). Collectivism also appears in the form of equality and conflict avoidance among its members (Friedman et al., 2006), but at the same time it involves the acceptance of an unequal distribution of power. As a result, even the abuse of power by superiors is often regarded as normal organisational behaviour (Leung, 2012).

Chinese organisational culture is also very paternalistic with a natural respect for authority and age (Selmer et al., 2009), and an ingrained obedience to superiors. Although it is said to discourage autonomy and participative management among employees, it also has its protective elements: superiors often reward the loyalty of their employees by taking a personal interest in their well-being and career progression (Leung, 2012).

The third element is uncertainty avoidance. China is a culture with strong uncertainty avoidance that manifests in the society as a low tolerance of ambiguity. That gives rise to numerous formal procedures, and both formal and unwritten rules governing behaviour that are expected to be obeyed. This is similarly connected to avoiding losing face and often manifests in different forms of indirect communication (Leung, 2012). Even though recent changes in Chinese social structure have meant the traditional values of equality and group solidarity have been giving way to productivity and competitiveness (Leung, 2012), Chinese organisational behaviour can still be difficult to comprehend for Westerners, and can cause friction and misunderstanding.

Despite the challenging balance of labour supply and demand in the Chinese labour market, it has recently become easier to find local talent with both local and the Western cultural understanding and language skills (Kühlman and Hutchings, 2010) as well as technical and commercial skills. Furthermore, the

employment situation of Westerners in China is complicated by stringent immigration and labour laws that mean most expatriate contracts are considered temporary and are subject to annual renewal (Feng, 2005).

These distinctive features that highlight the novelty of China as a career and labour market context (Boncori, 2013; Leung et al., 2011; Muir et al., 2014; Selmer, 2005, 2006; Selmer et al., 2009) provide ideal grounds for studying how issues arising from cross-cultural career experiences influence the development of PE among Western SIEs.

Method

This qualitative study aims to reveal insider perspectives (Oakley, 2000) on the PE development of Westerners – individuals coming from countries that share the common values that originate from a European heritage (Kurth, 2004) – who are SIEs in a culturally distant career context of local organisations (Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014; Arp et al., 2013) in China. The study seeks to provide deep and rich insights into the career experiences of those SIEs (Prasad and Prasad, 2002).

The subjective nature of the topic makes interviewing the most suitable method to capture individual perceptions, because it allows informants to express their views in their own words while the researcher maintains control over the process and has the freedom to focus on new topics as they arise (Bernard, 1988). This approach follows that of an increasing number of qualitative studies on PE (e.g. Berntson et al., 2006; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007). Interviews are also one of the most common methods used in organisational studies in the context of the constructivist paradigm and have proved effective at obtaining highly personalised data with a good return rate (David and Sutton, 2004, p. 214).

This study is based on the relatively recent but emerging phenomenon of Western SIEs in local organisations in China (Makkonen, 2015a, b), and accordingly a purposive sampling strategy was considered best suited. This was because the approach ensured only those informants whose personal experience in local Chinese organisations would add to the understanding of the issue were selected (Saunders, 2012).

The search for informants started with personal contacts, and those were subsequently used to prime the snowballing technique. However, in order to avoid a nationality bias among the Westerners, the majority of the informants were found through the social media application, LinkedIn. That strategy proved to be the most efficient way to identify SIEs of various nationalities working for different types of local organisations in several parts of China. In order to

confirm their status as SIEs on first contact, all potential informants were asked to describe how their employment in local organisations originally came about. Although some informants were third-party initiated employees, whose employment was originally initiated by friends, social network proposals, or head-hunters (Makkonen, 2015a), for the purpose of this study they were considered SIEs. This decision was based on the suggestions of Harrison et al. (2004) and Al Ariss (2010). According to those studies the personal motivation and volition to accept employment form the basis for SIE assignments. These characteristics together with the contextual features of China that complicate the process of obtaining employment in local organisations (e.g. limited mutual language proficiency with the HR departments and working visa procedures) may require the help of a third party to initiate the employment process particularly when dealing with it from a distance (Makkonen, 2015a).

Despite diligent attempts to locate more female SIEs, only two were found, which reflects the proportion of women in the CE industry. Finally, eventually 23 Westerners of different nationalities (n = 11), age groups and professional backgrounds (e.g. designers, process and R&D engineers, managers) working in the CE industry for local companies as SIEs were interviewed. The richness of the data collated from 23 informants meant those data were sufficient to meet data saturation requirements (Yin, 2014). The number of informants was also in line with the suggestions in the methods literature (Cresswell, 1994; Yin, 2014). Despite the sensitive nature of the topic, none of invited informants rejected the opportunity to participate.

All the informants were advised of the purpose of the research and of the topics being investigated. They were also given an opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any point and decline to answer questions on uncomfortable topics in order to protect their privacy and prevent any potential threat to their career progression. These were options suggested by Saunders et al. (2009). For the same reason, some demographic information such as professional background and nationality that would typically be recorded was omitted from the demographic records.

In the course of the interviews, it became apparent that the 23 informants would provide sufficient grounds to reach data saturation. The informants were encouraged to nominate an interview place and time they found most convenient to discuss their personal experiences. The interviews were conducted mostly face-to-face, and in relaxed and comfortable surroundings such as cafés, private homes or restaurants in China (Saunders et al., 2009). Respondents who had repatriated were interviewed via Skype or in person. The interviews were mainly

conducted in English, the lingua franca among the Western professionals in the CE industry, but some were held in Finnish when that was the mother tongue of the informant.

In order to ensure flexibility and responsiveness, the interviews were conducted in a conversational style that involved asking the informants to describe their experiences and feelings rather than answer open-ended questions in a strict order. They were also encouraged to express general observations on the topics in question, but also to approach the topic from the perspective of their peers. The approach prompted a considerable amount of probing as new issues emerged (Saunders et al., 2009). Despite the narrative style, the interviewer ensured that the following topics were covered: first, the informants' career history and background information; second, their perceptions and expectations for the expatriate experience PE before, during and after the employment in China retrospectively; and third, the attributes affecting the perceptions. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the informants, saved on a cloud-based server and transcribed, after which each informant was invited to comment on the transcribed version of the interview as suggested by Riessman (2008). The social demographic details of the informants are presented in Table I. Abbreviations for the region of origin are presented as Northern Europe (NE), Southern Europe (SE), North America (NA), and South America (SA).

All informants initially had one-year fixed-term contracts that were either extended annually or terminated, and most assignments lasted between just one and three years. Their employers were completely locally owned and managed organisations (small local, medium or large multinational corporations (MNCs)) in Beijing, Shanghai, and the Guangdong area. The interviews took between 44 and 106 minutes with the average length being 71 minutes. A majority of the informants ($n = 17$) came from Northern European countries (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, UK) that have similar cultures. The respondents were aged between 22 and 55 at the beginning of their assignments. Of the 23 SIEs, six were single. The majority of the SIEs were quite experienced in professional terms, with an average of close to 11 years of professional experience in the CE industry sector prior to their expatriation, when those with no or very little professional experience ($n = 5$) were excluded. Despite their professional experience in a very international industry sector, this group of SIEs were quite inexperienced as expatriates: only six informants had previous expatriation experience, and five of those had worked abroad in Western countries. At the time of the interviews, 12 of the informants had repatriated, three of whom subsequently returned to China to work (these cases are indicated in the table with an addition clause, e.g. two times 3 years $\frac{1}{4}$ 3+3).

These three re-expatriated examples are included in the 14 recorded as non-repatriated SIEs.

The author initially read the interview data several times and during the initial thematic assessment facilitated by NVivo10 software the resources that contribute to PE development were arranged on a timeline (before, during and after the expatriation in China) to identify the type and direction of PE development (low or high; stable, decreasing or increasing). This approach had the advantage of not being fixed into any “pre-existing theoretical framework” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81) but was conducted to provide guidelines to explain the dynamics of the PE development and why the perceptions appeared the way they did. After the careful assessment, the findings were categorised as either personal or conditional resources following the mainstream employability literature (Berntson et al., 2006; Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007; Wittekind et al., 2010). In order to reduce the threat of research bias, data derived from repatriated and non-repatriated SIEs were assessed separately.

The careful interpretation process involved the author not focusing only on what was explicitly said, but instead striving to understand the meaning of the stories and answers. Due to the sensitive nature of topic, this process aimed to consider not only the words but also how those words could be understood, and the apparent meaning of the terms used on a personal level (Geertz, 1973, p. 27). Despite the benefits of software assisted thematic categorisation, the actual interpretative process proved difficult owing to the responses being in two languages, and categorisation was ultimately conducted manually. This interpretation process (Riessman, 2008) aimed to identify similar or distinctive (Saunders et al., 2009) PE development patterns. After careful assessment, four groups with distinct PE trajectories and career experiences were isolated and those are presented in the following findings. The findings are further illustrated by direct quotations that are either representative for the particular group or exemplify an extreme case. Excerpts from responses not originally given in English were translated by the author.

Table I. Summary of the informant variables and interview data

Informant type M (Male)/F (Female)	Region of origin	Duration of interviews (mins)	Age at the beginning of SIE	Total tenure of assignment at the time of interview (years)	Professional years before assignment	Family status and location during the assignment	Size of the host organisation small – medium – large	Expatriation history	Location of the host organisation
R/C1(M)	NE	52	42	1	12	Accompanying spouse and small children	L	No	Shanghai
R/S2(M)	NE	65	47	2	11	Accompanying spouse	L	No	Guangdong area
R/S3(M)	NE	64	42	2	15	Accompanying spouse and school aged children for the first year	L	OE in Western country	Shanghai
NR/E4(M)	NE	71	42	2+2	13	Spouse and children at home	L	Repatriated SIE from China, re-expatriated SIE to China	Beijing
R/C5(M)	NE	66	55	1	15	Accompanying spouse	L	No	Guangdong area
R/S6(M)	NE	67	41	2	8	Accompanying spouse	L	No	Beijing
R/C7(M)	NE	72	51	3	21	Family at home	L	No	Guangdong area
R/S8(F)	NE	61	37	1	13	Single	L	OE in Western country	Shanghai
NR/W9(M)	SA	97	29	2+2	0	Accompanying spouse and a small child	From S to S	Repatriated SIE from China, re-expatriated SIE to China	Guangdong area
NR/E10(M)	NA	95	49	3	11	Local spouse	L	SIE+OE in Western country	Guangdong area

(continued)

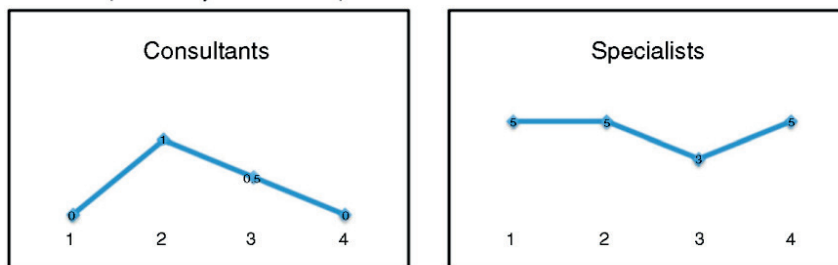
Informant type M (Male)/F (Female)	Region of origin	Duration of interviews (mins)	Age at the beginning of SIE	Total tenure of assignment at the time of interview (years)	Professional assignment years before assignment	Family status and location during the assignment	Size of the host organisation – small – medium – large	Expatriation history	Location of the host organisation
NE/W11 (M)	NE	66	40	2	6	Single	L	No	Guangdong area
NR/W12 (M)	SE	87	34	6	1	Single	From S to M to L	No	Beijing-Guangdong area
NR/E13(M)	NE	95	37	3+3	10	Accompanying spouse	L	OE in China, re-expatriated to China	Guangdong area
NR/S14(M)	NE	44	29	2	9	Single	L	No	Beijing
NR/W15 (M)	SA	48	23	3	0	Single	From S to S	No	Guangdong area
NR/E16(M)	NE	66	36	2	8	Accompanying spouse	L	SIE+OE in Western country	Beijing
NR/W17 (M)	NE	75	24	4	3	Single	From S to L	No	Beijing
NR/E18(M)	NE	55	41	2	5	Accompanying spouse	L	SIE in Western country	Beijing
NR/W19 (M)	SE	92	22	9	0	Accompanying spouse	From S to M to L	No	Beijing
NR/W20(F)	SE	92	22	9	1	Accompanying spouse	From S to M to L	No	Beijing
NR/E21(M)	NE	106	41	19	14	Family at home	L	SIE in Asia	Beijing
R/S22 (M)	NE	57	43	1	12	Single	L	No	Guangdong area
NR/E23(M)	NE	48	32	1	6	Accompanying spouse	L	No	Guangdong area

Notes: NE, Northern Europe; SE, Southern Europe; NA, Northern Americas; SA, Southern Americas

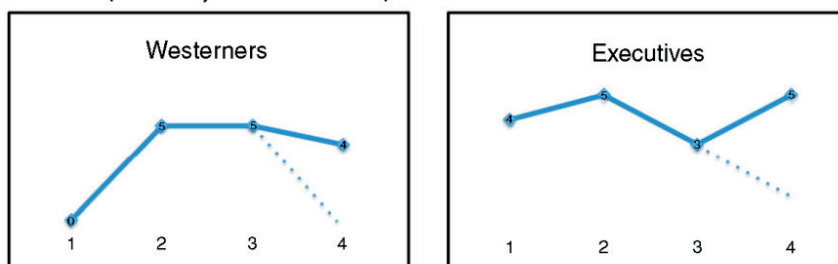
Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the PE development trajectories of SIEs can be distinctive even in the same industry sector, and depend on the type and level of their personal resources at each phase, and how they perceive the impact of conditional resources on their PE development. SIE careers also differed among the sample depending on the purpose or type of assignment. Despite differences between individual career experiences a careful interpretation process of the interviews revealed similarities and therefore the PE development patterns of the repatriated (R) Consultants (C), Specialists (S), and non-repatriated (NR) Westerners (W), and Executives (E) are reported. Hence in the quotations, combinations are used to identify the speaker, for example, NR/E refers to non-repatriated Executive, and R/C to repatriated Consultant. The names of the groups aim to illustrate their perceived initial roles or purpose in the local organisations. To clarify, the term Consultants refers to an employee group typically employed on a temporary basis for knowledge transfer purposes; that of Specialists to informants with special skills in short supply, but hired with a longer-term time objective; that of Westerners to individuals who were initially hired to inject Western prestige to highlight and promote the international image of an employer; and the term Executives to individuals who were hired to work in senior management positions in local organisations.

PE-development trajectories of repatriated SIEs



PE-development trajectories of non-repatriated SIEs



Notes: 1=Before expatriation; 2=In the beginning of expatriation in the host country; 3=During the expatriation in the host country; 4=For repatriated PE after the expatriation; for non-repatriated further PE development in the host country (continuous line) vs PE in the home country (dotted line)

Figure 2. Illustration of PE development trajectories

Table II. Summary of personal and conditional resources that affect the level and direction of PE development

		Repatriated Consultants	Specialists	Non-repatriated Westerners	Executives
Before	Personal resources	- Single industry sector specific KSAs	+ KSAs short in supply	- Lack of work experience	+/- Industry related KSAs
	Conditional resources	- Loss of job due to industry restructuration	+ Having lots of work opportunities	- Having lack of work opportunities	- Having limited work opportunities due to industry sector restructuration
During	1st phase personal resources	+ Skills short in supply in host-country	+ Hope for personal development and advancement	+ Rapid accumulation of professional KSAs and local networks	+ Industry related KSAs short in supply in host country
	1st phase conditional resources	+ Maturity; having industry related KSAs short in supply	+ Having KSAs short in supply	+ Western qualifications	- Lack of co-worker and superior support and development opportunities; lack of mutual trust
	2nd phase personal resources	- Lack of language skills and cultural understanding	- Lack of language skills and cultural understanding	+ Personal mobility in host-country	+ Accumulation of professional KSAs and cultural sensitivity
	2nd phase conditional resources	- Having temporary job focused on knowledge transfer; lack of co-worker, superior support and feedback and development opportunities	- Perceiving conflicting values, nationalism, hostility, lack of development and progression opportunities	+ Having lot of work opportunities available	+ Having embeddedness to organisation and organisational support; supply of information provided by employer
After/ Future	Personal resources	- Erosion of resources	+ Rapid recovery of resources	+/- Accumulated KSAs provide work opportunities, but may not be up to western standards	+/- Highly industry segment related KSAs
	Conditional resources	- Lack of work opportunities due to regressive field of industry	+ Having KSAs short in supply	- Increasing number of local talent, nationalism, lack of job opportunities at home	- Lack of job opportunities at home; having uncertainty over continuation of job in host country
Feelings over the SIE experience as a whole		Exploitation, competence erosion	Disappointment, competence erosion and stagnation	Trap, uncertainty	Trap, career satisfaction, alienation, uncertainty

Figure 2 and Table II summarise the findings. Figure 1 illustrates the PE development trajectories of four identified SIE groups, both repatriated and non-repatriated examples for the purpose of comparison between the groups. For the same reason, the trajectories of non-repatriated SIEs include a dotted line to illustrate the PE development of non-repatriated SIEs upon their anticipated repatriation. Table II presents the summary of personal and conditional resources that affected the level and direction of PE development outcomes and also the feelings that arose during the self-initiated expatriation in local organisations in China. Each resource at each phase is marked with either a + or – which signifies an increasing or decreasing impact on PE development.

PE development trajectories of repatriated SIEs

Background and PE of repatriated SIEs before assignment in China. The repatriated group of informants in this study comprises Western SIEs with two different types of PE development trajectory. The first type is Consultants (R/C), who were typically hired on a fixed short-term basis to facilitate knowledge transfer. Quite often Consultants were already unemployed or were anticipating becoming so, and consequently had decreasing or low PE in their home countries:

R/C1: Well, they wanted my knowledge and competences. I had worked on many mobile phone projects during my career and they wanted to have that knowledge. My value was in teaching them how to make a particular type of product and that's what they got. That product was their first in that product segment.

The second type are Specialists (R/S), and their initial intention was to work in China for a longer period of time as specialists supported by their competences or skills that were in demand in China. Despite high PE in their home country, they were often attracted by the career development opportunities China offered that were not necessarily available at home:

R/S6: And one thing that we (informant and his wife) discussed and discovered very quickly for both of us, was that we are not growing in our profession. She was a manager at (company) that time and I was at that time an art director at (company) that grew a lot during those years. So I was kind of high up, but I had hit a kind of administrative roof there, every organisation has such a roof, whether it's a roof of power or a roof of nationality [...] But we liked Asia as a culture [...] and we also understood [...] I understood very early that things would come from China. Things will move on from there very quickly, so I wanted to be there.

PE development of repatriated SIEs during the employment. All repatriated informants, both Consultants and Specialists, reported significant challenges and negative feelings relating to the local culture and management behaviour that were perceived to erode their personal resources including PE. Some of the specific challenges reported were connected to limited language skills that restricted opportunities to obtain feedback or guidance at work, or to connect with and receive professional support from their superiors and colleagues. Informants also reported experiencing hostile behaviour on the part of the locals, and even feelings of being exploited just to benefit their local co-workers or superiors:

R/S6: It's the Chinese paradox: the Chinese culture. It's the most contradictory culture I have ever experienced and it has an impact on your life. I was brought here to bring change and bring knowledge and the experience that they did not have, but immediately the Chinese boss said that this person, who brought this change here is not welcome [...] They'd say: "you don't understand our culture" and then you try logic: "yes, that's why I am here, because I can tell you a totally different perspective and you can learn from that." "Oh no, It does not work, because you don't understand our culture". So it just comes back to that answer: "We want progress, but we want to stay the same". It's a Chinese paradox, which will be very difficult for them to break [...] I was speaking with the Chinese (co-workers) and they said that you are perfect for the job, but you are not Chinese. I said that I can learn to speak it if you'd let me, but they say that that would not be Chinese. They are so nationalistic here [...] So everything that I have achieved there, whether I had done a great job, it was for those guys (superiors) to look better, I didn't [...] I didn't get anything back [...] nobody told me if I had done a great job, it's not the Chinese culture.

R/C5: They never shared anything and it was difficult to get any information, even if I asked [...] It was a very peculiar time, nobody told me what to do, nobody gave me feedback whether it was right or wrong – they never commented one way or the other. It was really difficult, you know, it was a totally Chinese company even though they like to present themselves as international. How to put it nicely [...] There were only two or three people who could speak English at any decent level, and that really made my work difficult. Neither of my superiors spoke English.

These factors that were perceived as eroding professional skills and the negative feelings in the workplace contributed to decreasing PE and even led some informants to question the value of the career experience as a whole:

R/S8: When you go there, you get to know new people and get new contacts, but over the long run your professional skills do just fade away, that's the negative side of it. From a career point of view I am not sure if it was a good choice, there was not so much I could do, it was more like sitting there like a vase and like: "nice, we have a Westerner here". I do understand that at the management level they had made that decision to acquire skills and knowledge from other companies, but at the floor level they simply could not do that, it must be related to the working culture or something, they don't share, don't do teamwork, and they are quite individualistic in many ways.

Other sources of negative feelings such as exploitation and disappointment during the course of expatriation in local organisations were connected to the unpredictable nature of HR practices. In some cases, contracts were not renewed as expected or were amended without proper explanations, or the employment was terminated midterm:

R/C5: Well, we had discussions about the possibility of continuing, but they gave up eventually, without explanation. Maybe it is just their strategy to take somebody in for a year or two, exploit the information and let them go, and then they would just take somebody new in.

R/S22: So I came home midterm (Why?). Well, the official explanation was that they'd had an organisation change, but I was also told that the boss that hired me was no longer in his position, and the new boss could no longer benefit from me. They looked at it only from their individual perspective, not what would have benefitted the whole company, so they just sent me home.

On the other hand, in contrast to contemporary Western business culture, the respect for maturity in Chinese organisational culture proved a temporary contextual advantage for those older Westerners:

R/C7: China as a culture has a respect for older people and they expect that. To get people to execute what a manager tells them, that is not a problem in China, but they need seniority and seniority is something that you get by being around for longer.

PE development of repatriated SIEs after the assignment. Both the repatriated Consultants and the Specialists found that, contrary to their initial expectations, their SIE assignments did not expressly contribute to enhanced PE or provide more career opportunities prompted by newly acquired resources when they returned home. Consultants repatriated because their fixed-term temporary assignments were not renewed, and Specialists most often based on their own choice. Specialists found employment after their expatriation despite the poor economic situation in the West, and when reflecting on their career experiences in China perceived the experience itself to have produced unexpected outcomes:

R/S6: The Chinese company has not boosted that (PE) in anyway, but my employability has changed from another perspective. The experience of being there. (Understanding) how it (China) is rising, what the obstacles are that China is facing and what are the possibilities that the West does not have. I know that now, and that is a lesson that I would not have learned by keeping my former job or taking a job in the USA or Europe.

Among the positive effects derived from the experience of working in China, there was a serious negative, one that was felt particularly by mature SIEs, who despite their extensive career experience were affected by age discrimination. The declining CE industry in the West means the labour market is saturated with other unemployed experts, who are sometimes younger than returning SIEs but have more current KSAs:

P/C7: I am looking (for a job) all the time. I don't know if my criteria are wrong [...] it's hard to see if the requirements have changed, there has been no need to look for a job for such a long time [...] I think that the values are like that today [...] I had this conversation and they said that they are actually looking for younger people. I remember thinking to myself when I was younger that over 50 year olds are really old, but I don't feel old at all, it should not be a preventing factor at all.

Despite their similar experiences, the PE development trajectories of Consultants and Specialists were different. Consultants' PE trajectories were continuously quite low or generally declining, with the exception of some temporary improvements during the international placement when the Consultants hoped to avail of either further career opportunities in China or employment upon repatriation. Specialists, on the other hand, despite their high and stable PE at home before and after the assignment in China, perceived their personal resources to be eroding during their stay, and not contributing to their PE development in the manner expected.

PE development trajectories of non-repatriated SIEs

Background and PE of non-repatriated SIEs before employment. The non-repatriated SIE informants can also be categorised under two different types of PE development trajectory. First, there were young non-repatriated Westerners (NR/W) with little work experience, and low levels of professional KSAs that would contribute to PE at home. Although all informants of the whole data set reported being valued for their Western origin, for the Westerners that was the primary stimulus for their employment, which was believed to contribute to the credibility and the international image of the local company:

NR/W20: They wanted some white face. (For what purpose?) Advertisement, show off, this kind thing, to show that they are international. A lot of companies do that and even when I was at (previous employer), I was feeling that it was like that and even now here at (current employer) [...] so I think a few years ago the (professional) requirements were not really high or precise and the level of design skills were kind of floating, quite flexible. But I think that there are still some companies that are using foreigners only for their own publicity.

The second type is the NR/E with high, but potentially decreasing, PE owing to rapid industry-specific changes in the West. The current research suggests they represent a rare type of foreign executive working in local organisations in developing economies usually in management, development, and international sales functions, but are a group that is growing (see also Arp et al., 2013):

NR/E4: I was basically dealing with three (career) opportunities at the same time. I did consider finding opportunities in (informant's home country), but it was really difficult, because (company) was going down and I (still) wanted to work with a phone vendor. But I actually know, why I was chosen [...] One in general is that many companies here that are doing evaluations of the people find it difficult, so they look very closely at the CV, so if you have been working for some key competitor, you have proved that you are a good guy, being a Westerner, so this is how they make their judgements, so in that case I was fulfilling their demand, they thought that I could be an important tool to influence decisions (of customers) and to bring credibility. I have always been like a CEO whisperer guy.

PE development of non-repatriated SIEs during the employment. Owing to their initially low levels of professional resources, those Westerners with little professional experience were quickly able to accumulate both local and

international networks as well as personal resources considered valuable by local employers:

NR/W12: I have learned a lot and been in contact with people from different countries [...] I have built my “designability” in China – I really did not have any sense of it before – and also my technical knowledge.

However, after the first years of intensive professional and cultural learning contributing to PE development, Westerners often perceive the development of their personal resources to slow or even stagnate. Some of the informants thought they had reached a glass ceiling in their local organisation and that made it difficult to obtain employment with the local subsidiaries of Western MNCs. The following excerpt underlines the potential challenges of cross-cultural assignments and illustrates how the personal resources acquired and considered valuable in local organisations were found to be inadequate or not to fit with the recruitment requirements of the other organisations:

NR/W11: Actually working for a Chinese company does not really help you to get a good enough portfolio to work in a non-Chinese company [...] because what you do, it’s really basic, pretty much just styling, and Western companies want to see far more than that.

Working for a local organisation was also perceived to be mentally challenging and was reported as a typical reason for self-directed repatriation midterm. The following excerpt illustrates the employability challenges faced by a Westerner, who after returning home eventually returned to China having found it difficult to find appropriate employment in the home country:

NR/W9: I just could not take it anymore (in China). It was just how time consuming working for that company was [...] and you know there is this vision, in which you are just a workhorse and so I knew that it was not going to fulfil me and I felt that I was under used [...] and I thought that it (work experience in China) would have helped me to find a job [...] But at home, you know, I was all the time looking for jobs, all the time [...] At that time I thought that [...] basically [...] what else was I going to do [...] I have been scanning job offers everywhere, everywhere [...] I mean [...] which other options (other than re-expatriation to China) did I really have?

Executives also reported similar challenges that hindered their performance and ability to gain the resources hoped for, and eventually led to repatriation for two of them.

The following excerpt highlights how the work experience in China was eventually perceived to provide resources that contributed to the Westerners employability in China and similarly led to re-expatriation:

NR/E4: My first goal was just to survive here when I came here, and it was so different and so hard that the frustration was so massive, the first time I was in China. But looking at it now, I did not learn things within my profession, but I learned things that I never planned to learn and it has provided me with value (employability). (How?) The classic thing that people do in the context of China is to take your own culture and to put it on the top of the company and people. But if you imagine that you are engineered completely different, then you understand it completely differently. To understand why they behave the way they do, why the company operates the way it does, that has really been an experience, to really learn to understand how a Chinese company operates, and the major differences from American or other Western companies.

Despite sharing similar initial challenges with repatriated informants, Executives eventually reported very positive career experiences. This was because they had reached a point of mutual trust with their colleagues that in turn provided them with access to a continuous flow of information, updated knowledge, and internal decision making that eventually contribute the high and increasing PE in the host country:

NR/E16: Everything would be just too easy there. (Where?) In West, and you'd never get recognised the way you do here. (Why do you get recognised here?) Because you are a Westerner and you are making a difference, you are making change, and once you've built that trust, they really start to respect your work.

NR/E13: I am (currently) in such a position that I get very future oriented information about the industry very regularly [...] like all the competitive intelligence reports and market reports and their strategy analytics and on how the market will develop [...] I am also luckily loaded with the information from colleagues and the thing is that the company sees that I can add value and as a result they do share information with me and I can contribute to a range of meetings and things.

Each of the non-repatriated informants underlined the significance of local networks and new resources such as understanding of the key aspects of the local culture and behaviour that contribute to their PE development, and provide a foundation for working efficiently in China:

NR/E10: I used to spend a lot of my time with the locals and tried to connect with them. It still helps with my job and could be considered an investment in my work.

NR/E21: It (being able to perform and work in China) is not just being able to speak the language, but how you contribute without stepping on people's toes, because in certain contexts the (local) communication can be harsh, so the way you present and speak to certain people and you really want to get the message across, but don't want to be seen as an obnoxious foreigner who thinks that he knows everything better than the Chinese [...] And the communication is not necessarily related to being able to speak the language, but also understanding the key aspects around this communication, how you behave, the gestures you use, your facial expressions, how you understand the hierarchy of people without being a fool [...] You know often you have a lot of foreigners coming and they don't know the etiquette of being invited to the dinner banquet or rejecting the food for instance, that would be an awful thing to do, if you are seeking a job opportunity in a Chinese organisation, just to give an example.

Future PE of non-repatriated SIEs. Although non-repatriated informants expected their PE to remain high in the host country, there were some concerns over the stability of their employability in the future. The rapid development of China continues to be seen as an opportunity, but also the growing pool of local talent together with perceived nationalism might hinder future career opportunities in the host country:

NR/W15: At the moment it seems that there is a good opportunity to work here in China, but I don't know how it will be in the future, Chinese people learn so fast, right now they need us, but later on it might be that they say that they don't need us anymore [...].

Despite the seductive career opportunities and those for professional learning in China, the informants with highly industry-specific KSAs were very concerned over their future employability in their home countries. They thought their KSAs might have lost value owing to the decline of the CE industry. A number of the informants felt alienated from their home country market and other industry sectors, and accordingly perceived themselves to be caught in an employability trap. Equally fulfilling career options were perceived difficult to find, so restricting the potential for repatriation:

NR/E4: This business is very addictive. It is a very special business; it's very attractive in many ways. So, I think it's very difficult for me not to have a very interesting job. But the key is of course to be able to find another interesting job (if this ends) and I often find it difficult to see what and where that could be (if not in the current industry).

NR/W12: There is still something that makes us stay here and there are a lot of things that make us leave, it's like in general in China, it's mixed feelings [...] but all the (work) opportunities are here that I would not have in (the home country), I could not find another job there. Here I can find a job in two days.

In summary, Westerners and Executives had distinctive PE development trajectories. While Westerners at first had rapidly rising PE trajectories that stabilised over time, Executives at first struggled with declining PE, but that assessment did eventually alter as the Westerners came to see their PE trajectory as rising and stable. Both groups ultimately experienced feelings of both job insecurity and of being in an employability trap, which informed their understanding that they would have low levels of employability at home, and their perception of a slight decrease in their PE in the host country.

Discussion

This study addressed the research question:

RQ1. How does the PE of Western SIEs develop in a cross-cultural career context, and why does it appear so.

It did so by exploring PE development trajectories among Western SIEs in a culturally distant career context, in local organisations in China.

The empirical findings of this study add to those of the small number of long-term PE development studies and confirm the dynamic nature of PE (Berntson et al., 2008; De Cuypers et al., 2012; Kirves et al., 2014; Mäkikangas et al., 2013). The current research is also among the first to examine the long-term PE development trajectories of expatriates in cross-cultural career settings. In utilising Hobfoll's (2001) COR theory, the current study is also one of the first to present how the cultural features of the host country have an impact on the acquisition or loss of resources that contribute to PE (De Cuyper et al., 2012; Hobfoll, 2001; Kirves et al., 2014). This study also contributes to SIE literature by illustrating how SIEs see their PE developing, and how PE development

trajectories are affected by the cultural settings of their host country, particularly in more challenging career contexts (cf. Tharenou, 2013)

The analysis of the career trajectories of Western SIEs in local organisations in China revealed how emerging career contexts increasingly provide a range of career opportunities and roles that can be based on their specific skills or merely on their Western ethnic background (Simon and Cao, 2009; Boncori, 2013; Arp et al., 2013). As a result, several similarities and disparities emerged to form four distinctive PE development trajectories observable during their cross-cultural career experience (Mroczek et al., 2006). For example, following the suggestion of Shaffer et al. (2012), scrutiny of PE trajectories indicates how at first all SIEs expect the assignments in local organisations to bring positive career and PE development outcomes. However, for most SIEs, excluding the Westerners with little prior work experience, the initial high level of expectation was followed by decreasing levels of PE. This finding confirms the suggestions of previous empirical literature (Tharenou, 2010; Hamori and Koyuncu, 2011; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014) contrary to popular expectations (Shaffer et al., 2012) SIE careers of skilled individuals in culturally distant career contexts can lead to perceptions of negative career outcomes and consequently to declining PE (Hobfoll, 1989). This feeling is more likely to arise in the face of limited organisational support and development opportunities (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010), and a lack of cultural understanding and language skills (Peltokorpi and Clausen, 2011; Luring and Selmer, 2011). The end result can be an accumulation of negative feelings and a perception of not being able to conserve existing resources, and accumulate or invest the new resources that could bolster PE (Hobfoll, 2002; Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008).

Further assessment of the PE development trajectories revealed more disparities. For example, SIEs in local organisations who had overcome the initial challenges posed by the host-country culture (e.g. Executives and Westerners) seemed eventually to receive more organisational support for their personal development (De Vos et al., 2011). This personal development benefit may reflect the Chinese desire to establish long-term professional relationships (Hofstede, 1984; Leung, 2012), but might also reflect the ability of these particular SIEs to establish themselves as corporate in-group members (Varma et al., 2011). This corporate and co-worker support, in accordance with the tenets of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2002) facilitated the accumulation of other resources that eventually contributed to high levels of PE in the host country. When questioned about their PE in light of career opportunities in their home countries compared to those in the host country, many of these informants considered their PE to be higher in

China. This was especially true of SIEs with career experience in a single industry sector (Weick and Berlinger, 1989) that was declining in the West (Berntson et al., 2006), or of those with little work experience prior to their arrival in China, the Westerners. Such perceptions seem to enhance feelings of being alienated from the home country and to some extent being trapped in the host country employment context.

Specialists on the other hand, owing to having more career and development opportunities available to them at home upon repatriation, typically perceived their capability to accumulate the resources that would contribute to their overall PE to be lower in the host country than at home. As a result, feelings of disappointment, and competence erosion or stagnation resulted in short-term assignments and repatriation.

The current study therefore underlines the contextual nature of PE (Forrier and Sels, 2003; Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008; Kirves, 2014; Nazar and van der Heijden, 2012). The findings equally illustrate how efforts made to strengthen employability in one context – be that an industry or a geographic area – such as acquiring resources appropriate to an industry sector or a host country can lead to becoming alienated from other career contexts. Most importantly however, this study underlines the significance of the host-country culture to the perceptions of how existing or new resources are either acquired or lost, and how perceptions of personal employability develop as a result (Kirves et al., 2014; De Cuyper et al., 2012; Mäkikangas et al., 2013). The career experiences of Western SIEs in local Chinese organisations confirm how cultural elements of the host country (e.g. the relevance of membership of an in-group to access social and professional support from local colleagues, or significant knowledge and information (Varma et al., 2011), or the personal resources to adjust to local expectations around communication and behaviour (Friedman et al., 2006; Selmer et al., 2009)) contribute to the ability to acquire resources that in turn enhance perceptions of high PE in the career context. A lack of such resources, as in the case of short-term employees, may result in professional abuse and discriminatory treatment by superiors and colleagues (Leung, 2012; Leung et al., 2011) and consequently give rise to negative perceptions of PE development.

Practical implications, limitations and further research

The findings of this study have practical implications. Understanding the dynamics of the gain and loss spirals of resources (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008) that contribute to the PE development (De Cuyper et al., 2012; Kirves et al., 2014) of SIEs is not only theoretically significant, but also increasingly relevant

for the increasing number of SIEs and migrants who independently seek career opportunities in cross-cultural career and labour market settings. Equally an empirical recognition of how resources are affected by the surrounding environments (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008) is relevant for employers looking for international talent. Such firms should aim to foster positive interactions between SIEs and the rest of the organisation. Organisations could provide supervisory support and development opportunities, that according to the main principles of COR theory, should lead to mutual gain spirals for both parties and the potential for the resources of SIEs to be linked to the gains and strengths of teams or organisations as a whole.

By highlighting the significance of PE, this study illustrates how individuals considering SIE careers, particularly in cross-cultural career contexts, should be prepared not only to consider the positive career outcomes but also the potential career risks. These may include the perceptions of decreasing employability and an employability trap that may manifest as a growing alienation from other career contexts, and may thus hinder returning home at a specific time.

The findings can also shed light on why individuals, and particularly SIEs in cross-cultural career settings, can have such negative feelings about their assignments (Tharenou, 2010; Hamori and Koyuncu, 2011; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014). This applies particularly to employees who could be considered involuntarily temporary (Atkinson, 1984). A limited cultural understanding of the host country and its language (Ng et al., 2009; Peltokorpi and Clausen, 2011; Lauring and Selmer, 2011) might restrict the amount and quality of meaningful contact with local people.

This research purposefully highlights the PE development of both repatriated and non-repatriated SIEs working in the CE industry in cross-cultural career settings by examining the perceptions of Westerners in an oriental cultural context. It therefore represents only one mono-dimensional approach to the issue and cannot be generalized to other career settings. This limitation underlines the need to explore the issue in other settings. For example, future research might examine how Chinese SIEs perceive their employability in the West. Other significant limitations are the sample size and the absence of women. On the other hand, the small number of female informants does also reflect the proportion of women working in the CE industry. There is evidently potential for further studies on the role of gender in new types of cross-cultural career contexts in local organisations. This strongly contextualised study could also not address the effect of the type, location or the ownership of the local

organisation, although those aspects would undoubtedly be significant factors in an assessment of the career experiences of Westerners (cf. Simon and Cao, 2009). This limitation might provide an interesting avenue for further investigation of the topic.

Most importantly, however, this study presents subjective and context-related findings reflecting the career experiences of just one particular sample group of SIEs. Assessment of their career experiences was mostly based on retrospective self-reflection on very sensitive topics that the informants may not have analysed previously. Similarly despite the careful interpretation process applied, there remain grounds for discussion over the validity of the interpretations (Riesmann, 2008). It is therefore essential to underline that the categories presented here represent just one aspect of the phenomenon and are not the only possible ways to represent the types of SIE careers people have in culturally distant career contexts.

Despite its limitations, the enhanced understanding of PE development in cross-cultural career settings may benefit studies on migration and culture, for example. This study may be one of the first to open such research paths, and the complexity and multidimensional nature of the topic certainly merits further empirical and longitudinal research. Other issues also merit more attention, including how well the perceptions of SIEs reflect the objective reality of their employability; how PE develops for those SIEs who felt trapped when abroad after their eventual repatriation; and how durable are the reported perceptions. Perhaps an even more interesting line of enquiry would involve building upon the theoretical concepts of protean and boundaryless careers (Hall, 1996; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) in conjunction to the second principle of COR theory – “people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources” (Gorgievski and Hobfoll, 2008, p. 5) – to investigate what actions SIEs actually take in the form of career self-management behaviour to protect their resources. It would also be interesting to know more of the extent to which SIEs really are self-directed are in terms of managing their employability. Research offering an employer’s perspective on the employability of SIEs in various career contexts would also be most welcome.

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Employer perceptions of self-initiated expatriate employability in China : A person-environment fit perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer an employer perspective on the employability of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) by contrasting SIEs with other identified staffing groups available for the staffing of MNC subsidiaries in China.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews with 24 Westerners with direct staffing responsibilities in subsidiaries of western MNCs located in China. The employability of each identified staffing group was assessed using the person-to-environment fit approach from four-fit perspectives (person-to-job and to-group, organisation and cultural context). **Findings** – The study revealed how from the employer perspective SIEs do not form a heterogeneous group, but instead there are two groups with different fit profiles. The study illustrates how western SIEs are an uncommon and under-used staffing group in cross-cultural staffing settings in China due to their low employability in comparison to alternative staffing groups. The study also revealed the prevalent bipolarity (the Westerners vs the Chinese) and heterogeneity within the identified staffing groups.

Research limitations/implications – The study recognises the lack of employer perspective in SIE literature and also that SIEs are an under-represented group in the staffing literature.

Practical implications – The findings help explain how MNC staffing is culturally bound and how the staffing process should incorporate more than just an assessment of job-related qualifications. The findings also help explain the challenges SIEs can experience in cross-cultural career settings. **Originality/value** – The study is one of the first to provide an employer perspective on SIE careers and contrast SIEs to the other alternative staffing groups available to MNC subsidiaries in China.

Keywords China, Employability, Self-initiated expatriates, Employer perspective, MNC subsidiary staffing, P-E fit

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Introduction

The United Nations estimates 232 million people live and work outside of their home countries (United Nations, 2013), and of those people the proportion of expatriates was estimated as 50.5 million in 2013, an annual growth of 2.4 per cent since 2009 (Finaccord, 2014). Despite the difficulty of estimating the total number of self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) – individuals who “self-initiate their international relocation, with the intentions of regular employment and temporary stay” (Cerdin and Selmer, 2014, p. 1293) – they are said to represent an increasing and significant global staffing population (Jokinen et al., 2008; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012). Although SIEs have often been contrasted to organisation-sent expatriates (OEs) (e.g. Jokinen et al., 2008; Kühlmann and Hutchings, 2010; Von Borell de Araujo et al., 2013; Andresen et al., 2013), or/and to host country nationals (HCNs) (Okamoto and Teo, 2011; Tharenou, 2013), the current MNC staffing literature largely neglects the role of SIEs in MNC subsidiary staffing, with some few exceptions (e.g. Tharenou, 2013). This omission is particularly apparent if one considers the perspective of employers and of those responsible for staffing – the gatekeepers of the job market. The lack of research on SIE staffing in MNC subsidiaries from an employer perspective means that we do not fully understand how SIEs as a group compares with other staffing alternatives. This study therefore contributes another potentially important perspective in understanding what defines SIEs in addition to technical definitions or self-perceptions. More specifically, it improves our understanding about how well they are perceived to be able to perform the tasks assigned to them within a particular environment (culture, organisation, group, job), and thus how employable SIEs are viewed to be from a fit perspective.

The main purpose of this study is, through the adoption of the employer perspective, to enhance our understanding of the employability of SIEs and of MNC subsidiary staffing in China. This is done by addressing the research questions:

RQ1. How is the employability of SIEs viewed by MNCs in comparison to other staffing groups in China from a fit perspective, and what drives those perceptions of fit?

The study is carried out on the assumption that each staffing group has a different level of demand-ability fit (Edwards, 1991) and one group might be better for a particular strategic concern than another (Tarique et al., 2006). It also follows that, drawing on Hofstede’s (1984, 2001) cultural dimensions, MNC

subsidiaries in culturally distant contexts will face different staffing challenges than those at the MNC's home base. Therefore, the questions of fit and employability are important not only for employers who struggle to recruit candidates with the best fit and align corporate HRM practice in order to motivate and retain the different staffing groups (Zhu et al., 2013), but also for SIEs considering taking both financial and personal risks to explore self-directed employment opportunities in cross-cultural labour markets (Arp et al., 2013; Isakovic et al., 2013; Von Borell de Araujo et al., 2013; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2014; Muir et al., 2014; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014; Luring and Selmer, 2014). The study applies the theoretical framework of person-environment (P-E) fit (Ostroff et al., 2002), which provides a meaningful way of exploring employer perceptions of employee fit and the employability of SIEs.

This qualitative study makes two key contributions. First, it contributes to the SIE literature by incorporating the employer perspective into the study of SIE fit and employability. This helps to address the current imbalance in research that focuses on the perspectives of SIEs themselves, and allows for a more holistic understanding of SIE employability and careers. Second, the study contributes to the global staffing literature by examining global staffing from an MNC subsidiary perspective in China. This allowed for a more nuanced categorisation of alternative staffing groups, including SIEs that more accurately reflects the views of employers and the diversity that characterises the labour market in China today.

The study starts with a literature review of MNC subsidiary staffing and the SIE literature. It then moves on to examine the theoretical foundations of P-E fit and employability. Having introduced China as an MNC staffing context, the paper outlines the study's method. The findings section reports the identified staffing groups from four-fit perspectives, against which the fit and employability of SIEs are contrasted and elaborated on in the discussion section. The paper concludes with a discussion of the study's implications, limitations and an outline of potential future research.

Literature review

MNC subsidiary staffing and SIEs

MNC subsidiary staffing as a process aims to maximise critical knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that contribute to the overall effectiveness and competitive advantage of an organisation in an international context. It does so by considering candidates' job-related qualifications and comparing those to the demands of the job, to select the candidate with the best match (fit) (Judge and

Ferris, 1992). The most commonly referenced approaches to MNC staffing are Perlmutter's (1969) ethnocentric, polycentric, geocentric and the later regiocentric (Wind et al., 1973) approaches.

The ethnocentric approach places parent country nationals (PCNs) or OEs in the key management positions (Kühlmann and Hutchings, 2010) of the subsidiary due to their familiarity with corporate goals, policies and practices (Harzing, 2001; Hocking et al., 2004). For this reason the roles of the OEs are usually connected to business strategy coordination and control, the implementation of corporate culture, knowledge transfer and development of HR practices. This applies particularly to geographically or culturally distant and strategically important subsidiaries (Colakoglu et al., 2009).

As a result of an increasing need for responsiveness and embeddedness in local markets (Beechler et al., 2005) MNCs have started applying both polycentric and regiocentric approaches. Instead of emphasising organisation-specific knowledge, this approach focuses on local- or region-specific KSAs such as linguistic and cultural understanding, knowledge of networks and social behaviour (Hutchings, 2005). These approaches also offer an efficient method to facilitate commitment and perceptions of advancement opportunities among HCNs (Groenewald, 2008).

Despite the success of expatriate assignments, MNCs have encountered challenges such as high-OE failure rates (Walsh and Zhu, 2007) and attrition upon repatriation (Scullion and Collings, 2006) or difficulty in finding suitable candidates (Brookfield, 2014; Farndale et al., 2010; Scullion et al., 2007). In addition, skilled and talented HCNs have been in short supply, particularly in transitional or emerging economies (Kühlmann and Hutchings, 2010; Wu, 2008) or may require intensive internal socialisation in order to work efficiently (Worm et al., 2001). Despite their best efforts, HCNs have been found to experience difficulties in conducting operations in alignment with corporate goals (Kühlmann and Hutchings, 2010; Tharenou and Harvey, 2006). Their often low-organisational commitment can also jeopardise an organisation's stability (Groenewald, 2008; Yip and McKern, 2014). Although HCNs have been commonly regarded as a cheaper staffing alternative to costly OEs (Scullion and Collings, 2006), the salaries of HCNs are increasing as a result of economic, sociological and demographic development in emerging labour markets (Wu, 2008).

We must now examine how SIEs fit into this picture. The challenges described above have led some MNCs to examine alternative staffing options. Alternatives presented in the literature include locally hired expatriates

(Crowley-Henry, 2007), foreign managers (Kühlmann and Hutchings, 2010) and transnational or global managers (Tarique et al., 2006). These suggested staffing alternatives seem to resonate with the current literature on SIEs, and although they might not be strong on alignment with an organisation's history or values, or even have company-specific skills (Kühlmann and Hutchings, 2010), this kind of employee can contribute cross-cultural skills, local networks (Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013) and be more capable of cultural adjustment as a result of stronger country embeddedness (Lo et al., 2012). For these reasons they have been suggested as being useful for reducing internal frictions between different staffing groups, and transferring skills in short supply at a particular time (Tharenou, 2013). SIEs can therefore contribute to resolving issues around cost and commitment (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012; Scullion et al., 2007).

Despite the increasing significance and viability of SIEs (Jokinen et al., 2008; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Finaccord, 2014) there is little mention of them in the international staffing literature from the employer or staffing perspectives (see Tharenou, 2013). This may be explained by the traditional staffing focus on the top management positions in MNC subsidiaries (e.g. Beechler et al., 2005; Colakoglu and Caligiuri, 2008; Colakoglu et al., 2009; Fang et al., 2011; Sekiguchi et al., 2011; Reiche and Harzing, 2011, pp. 185-189) that ignores any other organisational levels or positions in which SIEs might be employed (Tharenou, 2013).

SIE employability and P-E fit

An employer's assessment of a candidate's employability is likely to be based on the ability to perform the tasks required in a particular environment (Edwards, 1991) that affects the candidate's likelihood of acquiring or keeping a job in the future (Wittekind et al., 2010). This definition applies to both individual and context-related attributes (Forrier and Sels, 2003) that interact within a given labour market. An employee's employability is therefore not only an indication that individual's attributes match the requirements of his or her job, but also of that person's potential to get an appropriate job and remain employed. Therefore if the employers' assumptions about the candidates' characteristics and values reflect the perceptions of their behaviour (and employability) in given context (Aycan, 2005), it is also reasonable to assume that those perceptions would affect the staffing decisions (Rynes and Gerhard, 1990) and could therefore be regarded as significant.

The question remains of how management can estimate a candidate's ability to perform and so enhance the firm's chances of recruiting the right staff. The concept of fit has often been used for such purposes because it not only

recognises the differences between individuals but also between staffing groups, and how one group could be better for a particular strategic concern than another (Tarique et al., 2006). The theory of P-E fit goes back over 100 years (e.g. Parsons' (1909) congruence concept in vocational guidance, as cited in Ostroff et al., 2002), and is based on the assumption that both person and environment interact with each other to acquire a fit (Ehrhart, 2006). Although the fit can be evaluated either subjectively or objectively (Kristof-Brown and Guay, 2011), this study considers only subjective or perceived fit, terms that have often been used interchangeably (e.g. Judge and Cable, 1997; Kristof-Brown and Guay, 2011).

Another key question is what constitutes the environment in the context of fit. Although a general definition has been offered in the form of, "a context in which individuals carry out task activities" (Tarique et al., 2006, p. 208), more specific contexts can be determined. Traditionally an environment has been used with reference to a job (P-J) (Kristof-Brown and Guay, 2011; Sekiguchi, 2004; Ehrhart, 2006) with a focus on a person's KSAs and the job requirements that have usually formed a basis from western staffing decisions (Aycan, 2005). It has similarly been referred as an organisation (P-O) (Kristof-Brown and Guay, 2011) with a focus on organisation's values, goals and culture or its characteristics such as structures, tasks or technology (Van Vianen, 2000). More recently, the environment has referred to the fit with a group (P-G) (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Boon and Den Hartog, 2011) referring to co-workers or direct superiors (Van Vianen, 2000) and recognising differences between their personal values, personality or behaviour styles (Van Vianen et al., 2011), but also as a fit with the whole cultural context (P-C) in which a particular interaction takes place (Van Vianen, et al., 2004; Jun and Gentry, 2005; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2014) consisting of elements such as national culture, values, norms or prototypical personality traits (Ward et al., 2004). Although all the forms of fit can be assessed independently, they do overlap with each other, and their strengthening or weakening effects on fit can also vary (Van Vianen et al., 2011).

As perceptions of fit (low, partial or high) and the direction of its development (stable, decreasing or increasing, in Mroczek et al., 2006) tend to impact employee commitment and job satisfaction (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2014; Schiefer et al., 2012) that in turn affect their overall performance and effectiveness (Zimmerman, 2008), and may thus either reduce or increase the intention of leaving an employer (Van Vianen, 2000), such perceptions also provide a meaningful way of assessing the employability of SIEs from different fit perspectives.

China as a context for MNC subsidiary staffing

China has been among the world's fastest growing economies for the last 30 years (World Bank, 2014; OECD, 2013, pp. 9-11) and has not only been able to attract western MNCs to establish global manufacturing hubs (Fryxell et al., 2004), but also has rapidly developing and expanding internal markets. This situation has led to a rise in the literature on staffing or different staffing groups in China. Research has touched upon the adaptation and role of expatriates in subsidiaries (Selmer, 2004, 2005, 2006; Hutchings, 2003, 2005), issues of local responsiveness and localisation (Worm et al., 2001; Fryxell et al., 2004; Hartmann et al., 2010) but also emerging staffing groups such as Sea Turtles – western educated repatriating Chinese – (Ip, 2006; Zweig, 2006; Counsell, 2011; Zeithammer and Kellogg, 2011; Guo et al., 2013; Yip and McKern, 2014).

Despite the variety of staffing groups available, there apparently remains a severe imbalance between the demand and supply of labour (Wu, 2008; Brantingham and Nosal, 2013), which has often been explained by the historical development of China, its theoretically oriented education system and the general lack of experience in international business contexts (Farrell and Grant, 2005). This means that western MNC subsidiaries have struggled to meet their staffing needs and find individuals capable of implementing subsidiary business strategies, coordinating and controlling the day to day business activity, and developing HR activities in line with corporate policy (Harzing, 2001; Hocking et al., 2004). They are also in need for people who can understand local market needs and practice (Kühlman and Hutchings, 2010) without compromising the business ethics of the MNC subsidiary (Ghauri and Fang, 2001). Quite recently however, it has been getting easier to find local talent with the right fit (Kühlman and Hutchings, 2010). This is particularly true if an employer is willing to compromise on the expected levels of experience (Brantingham and Nosal, 2013), or recruit Chinese talent returning home with experience of western culture and languages, but who remain embedded in Chinese culture (Yip and McKern, 2014).

In addition to the labour market challenges, China with its stringent immigration and residency policies (Pieke, 2012) has often been referred to as the most demanding expatriate location (Brookfield, 2014). Its paradoxical national culture based on Confucian values (Warner, 2009) is challenging for Westerners to comprehend and makes it difficult for foreigners to work efficiently (Lassere and Ching, 1997). Challenges not only stem from the language (Selmer, 2006) but also from the culture, which in terms of Hofstede's study of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1984, 2001) is based particularly on high collectivism,

power distance and a long-term orientation, a combination that manifests in the importance of maintaining face, and valuing harmony and long-term relationships (Dunfee and Warrant, 2001). Although national cultural values based on statistics have been criticised as incapable of explaining the behaviour of individuals (Minkov and Hofstede, 2014), they have been found to contribute to the strategies and behaviour of employees at the individual level (Fu et al., 2004). These distinctive values have been used to explain the local behaviour that is fundamentally different from that of Westerners' (Hofstede, 1984, 2001; Leung, 2012). For example, the long-term orientation and pursuit of long-term relationships based on both family-based and business-based social networks (Fan, 2002) of the Chinese alongside their strongly felt obligation to offer and reciprocate favours (guanxi) (Child and Warner, 2003), means that they often view western (and other foreign) workers on temporary assignments as outsiders. That designation then hinders access to local networks and (market/business) knowledge, and to the support of local co-workers and superiors, particularly for those with a lower rank in the organisation (Varma et al., 2011). Similarly the paternalistic corporate culture (Farh and Cheng, 2000) and natural respect for authority may provide fertile ground for supervisor behaviour considered acceptable by the locals (Ng et al., 2012) but which Westerners might consider abusive. These attributes not only detract from the efficient performance of the expatriates, but put also stress on MNCs' HRM practice, which is often based on western individualistic foundations (Warner, 2009).

Although culture can be considered remarkable stable over time (Minkov and Blagoev, 2009) and the basic values that stem from the culture can be expected to remain the same (Cooke, 2009), values cannot be assumed to apply to all individuals across the whole nation (Leung, 2008; Minkov and Hofstede, 2011). Recent studies suggest there is a slow changing of values among the younger Chinese generation towards more individualistic behaviour (Cooke, 2009) and an emphasis on personal material achievements, performance and competitiveness that over-ride traditional values of equity and group solidarity or organisational commitment (Leung, 2008). This development might be explained by China's recent single child policy (Liu et al., 2015), but is more often ascribed to its rapid economic growth (Minkov and Blagoev, 2009) that has pressurised MNC subsidiary staffing as it becomes more difficult to retain local talent (Leung, 2008).

How do SIEs fit into the staffing composition of MNC subsidiaries in China? Although the concept of fit does recognise the differences between individuals and different groups, and that one group could be better suited to a particular

strategic concern than another group (Tarique et al., 2006), there seems to be no available research considering western SIEs as one such group in the context of Chinese MNC subsidiary staffing.

Method

This qualitative study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of western individuals responsible for western MNC subsidiary staffing. It also aims to provide insider perspectives on MNC subsidiary staffing in its natural setting accompanied by rich explanations of the phenomenon (Prasad and Prasad, 2002). The subjective nature of the topic indicated that interviews would be a suitable method to allow the informants to express their views on various types of employees in their own terms without using a priori categorisations, while allowing the researcher to maintain control over the process. Interviews are also one of the most common methods used in organisational studies in the context of the constructivist paradigm and have proved an effective means of obtaining highly personalised data with a good return rate (David and Sutton, 2004, p. 214).

Owing to the need to identify different staffing groups against which the fit and employability of SIEs could be contrasted, the current research adopts a purposive sampling strategy (Saunders and Rojon, 2014). Although it used different search methods to identify suitable informants, only those with personal experience of MNC subsidiary staffing in China were chosen so as to improve understanding of the issue at hand (Saunders, 2012). The specific reasons guiding the selection included the respondents being able to represent the strategic staffing view of headquarters within the subsidiary, and being the people who created and administered staffing policy, thus making them the gatekeepers for the jobs available in those subsidiaries. Second, for the western applicants they present the most likely contact point when approaching the MNC subsidiaries in China. It is far more difficult to interview local Chinese with staffing experience owing to the difficulty of finding their contact details, cultural differences and the likely absence of shared communication skills that would facilitate the process. Third, western HRM informants not only possess an understanding of the local staffing and the labour markets, but also have first-hand expatriate experience and an understanding of the challenges Westerners face in such an environment. Fourth, their staffing experience in organisations that are significant employment providers in China for all potential staffing groups provides them with a clear understanding of the characteristics of the available western employees.

In total, 24 western informants with MNC subsidiary staffing experience in either HRM or operative managerial functions (CEOs, regional managers, country managers, operations managers and HR directors) were approached and invited to participate. This number was in line with the suggestions in existing research. For example, Creswell (1994) has suggested 20-30 informants (Creswell, 1994), and that number should serve the purpose of data saturation, provide confidence in the findings (Yin, 2014) and provide the means for analytical generalisation rather than the statistical form. They worked in MNC subsidiaries representing a wide spectrum of industries, and some worked locally operating as western recruitment agents in China. The initial group of respondents were identified from among personal contacts, and that group then provided a source for further snowballing, but the majority of the informants were located and approached via LinkedIn. The authors' professional backgrounds offered access to a very large professional data-base on LinkedIn, which proved an efficient means of locating suitable western informants in China. The approach aimed to increase the validity of the findings (Yin, 2014).

The selected group comprised four women and 20 men and represented a variety of nationalities (American, British, Danish, Finnish, German and Greek) and industries (consumer electronics, consultancy, machinery, metallurgy and plastics), thus providing multiple sources of evidence (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) while countering the potential for national bias (Yin, 2014). Their China-specific staffing experience varied from two to 13 years, which also increased the confidence in the findings. Interviews lasted 25-109 minutes with an average of 54 minutes. Background information on the informants is presented in Table I.

The informants were identified, and informed of the topics and themes of the research before they were asked to confirm their participation. Although the aim was to capture the employer perceptions it was thought that perceptions of those responsible for MNC subsidiary staffing would be more important in staffing decisions and to understanding how SIEs as a group are treated than merely collating the official MNC policies. Therefore, all informants were invited to contribute as individual staffing professionals by reflecting on the questions subjectively based on their professional experience and observations in China, but not as representatives of their employers. This approach was also designed to ease access to information and reduce bureaucracy in a context where the biggest hurdle for western researchers is the lack of accessibility (Cooke, 2009). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, all informants were given an opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any point and to decline to answer any uncomfortable questions as suggested by Saunders et al. (2009). The safeguards were intended to protect their anonymity and prevent any potential threat of

negative career consequences. For the same reason, Table I does not include very detailed background information on the informants.

Table I. Background information of the informants and the interviews

Person (no.) M(male)/F(female)	Duration of interview	Nationality	Year of staffing experience in China	Industry sector	Position type
P1 (F)	37	Finnish	4	Consumer electronics	HRM
P2 (F)	33	Finnish	3	Consumer electronics	HRM
P3 (F)	47	Finnish	3	Consumer electronics	HRM
P4 (M)	109	American	3	Consultancy	Recruitment consultation
P5 (M)	50	German	4	Consultancy	Recruitment consultation
P6 (F)	34	Finnish	6	Machinery	HRM
P7 (M)	65	British	2	Consultancy	Recruitment consultation
P8 (M)	75	British	10	Consultancy	Recruitment consultation
P9 (M)	69	Finnish	2	Consumer electronics	Managerial
P10 (M)	51	Finnish	3	Consumer electronics	Managerial
P11 (M)	63	Finnish	12	Metallurgy	Managerial
P12 (M)	108	German	13	Consumer electronics	Managerial
P13 (M)	63	Finnish	12	Consumer electronics	Managerial
P14 (M)	55	Finnish	13	Consumer electronics	Managerial
P15 (M)	56	Danish	3	Metallurgy	Managerial
P16 (M)	35	Finnish	12	Plastics	Managerial
P17 (M)	51	Greek	4	Consumer electronics	Managerial
P18 (M)	73	Finnish	6	Plastics	Managerial
P19 (M)	41	Finnish	8	Machinery	Managerial
P20 (M)	27	Finnish	3	Automation	Managerial
P21 (M)	46	Finnish	7	Consumer electronics	Managerial
P22 (M)	38	Finnish	4	Metallurgy	Managerial
P23 (M)	25	Danish	6	Metallurgy	Managerial
P24 (M)	46	Finnish	5	Consultancy	Recruitment consultation

Half of the informants were interviewed by phone or via Skype during 2013 and in early 2014, and the other half in person in China. The informants were encouraged to choose relaxing and comfortable surroundings and a convenient time to discuss their personal experiences (Saunders et al., 2009). This tactic was

intended to ensure the honesty of the informants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted by a single author either in English or in Finnish, if the latter was the informants' mother tongue, as these were the most convenient languages to access insight into the research question (Saunders and Rojon, 2014). The informants were asked quite broad questions on the development of the labour market in China in general, and their personal staffing experiences, and were also asked for their general observations, so as to explore the research topic and find emerging patterns or regularities (Saunders et al., 2009) in cross-cultural MNC subsidiary staffing. This ensured flexibility and responsiveness as well as providing opportunities to discuss themes or perceptions that could not be considered in advance (Miles and Huberman, 1984), or the ones that had emerged from the interviews of their peers. The initial interview guide included questions such as: Can you tell me about your observations of the development of the Chinese labour market? What kinds of staffing groups can you identify and how would you describe their characteristics from the staffing perspective in China? And tell me how different staffing groups interact and work together? The informants were also asked to contrast the identified staffing groups with others and if the informants did not mention a group of western individuals who had directly sought employment in China, the interviewer prompted them with a mention of the SIE staffing group.

The richness of the experiences and observations of the informants led the author to use iterative questioning and probing as new issues emerged (Saunders et al., 2009). This method allowed the author to ensure that the meanings were understood correctly. This approach also supported the conscious intention to follow a non-linear research process, which incorporated a constant overlap of data analysis and data collection, which as Eisenhardt (1989) observed should result in variations between the interviews. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the informants and later transcribed. Each informant was subsequently invited to comment on the interview transcript (Riessman, 2008) with the aim of ensuring the quality of the findings. The input that was not originally in English was transcribed and then translated by the author.

In the assessment phase, the researcher applied the idea of systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, 2012), according to which a researcher aims to match theory and reality by "constantly going back and forth from one type of research activity to another, and in between empirical observations and theory" (Dubois and Gadde, 2002, p. 555). At first the researcher became familiar with the data through multiple readings of the interview transcripts as well as the notes taken during and after the interviews. This enabled the inductive identification of distinctive staffing groups and their fit against emerging themes from the data

that are perceived to be significant from an organisational perspective, but which also facilitate the interpretation of the findings. All the findings were then to coded and collated in a matrix table applying the content analysis approach (Yin, 2014; Mayring, 2004). Eventually an adaptation of the well-established theory of P-E fit provided a framework against which the empirical findings could be assessed as objectively as possible (Ragin, 1992).

In the interviews, the informants may have described the staffing groups in a variety of terms, but for the purpose of this study if the literature provided well-established labels, those were used in reporting; an example would be the adoption of the term Sea Turtles. For the new and distinctive groups emerging from the interviews, illustrative names were provided by the author. These steps were taken in order to be able to answer the research questions and distinguish the new staffing groups and contrast their fit with the one SIE type. Below all findings are illustrated by examples and direct quotations to illustrate majority opinions, or an extreme case (Saunders and Rojon, 2014).

Findings

For the purposes of this study, the informants were asked to discuss and contrast the staffing groups they assessed to be significant and distinctive from the others from the subsidiary staffing perspective in China. Despite the diversity of the sub-groups, the findings illustrate and emphasise the strong bipolarity of the main staffing categories that not only share the same geographical boundaries but also a cultural orientation: the Westerners and the Chinese.

The first main category, the Westerners, consists of the traditional group of OEs, but also of two other sub-groups of SIE revealed by analysis and labelled by the author the Localised Westerners, and the Newcomer Westerners. Members of both groups are by definition SIEs rather than OEs but Localised Westerners refers to all Westerners with an established presence in the host country and an expected familiarity with the cultural context. Newcomer Westerners are individuals seeking or considering employment for the first time in the host country with no previous expatriate experience of it. This distinction is made in order to underline how each staffing group has different levels of understanding of the cultural context to start with. In the interviews, however, informants often used the terms “Westerners” and “expats” interchangeably without distinguishing if they were referring to western SIEs or OEs. This seemed to be connected to the very low numbers of SIEs of any form in China. In the interpretation process, each staffing group is distinguished by linking the

quotation to the staffing group it was actually referring to with a short explanation in parentheses.

The second category, the Chinese (or HCNs), was presented by the employers as consisting of three groups namely: Locals, Sea Turtles and Outer Chinese. Although the name “Locals” was similarly often used as a general label for all Chinese (local, returning or Outer Chinese), in this study (except in the direct quotes) it is used to refer to local Chinese with no work or educational experience abroad. That does not preclude the members of the group from having gained international work experience locally by working for foreign subsidiaries or local companies in international business. The Sea Turtles were often referred to as returnees, returning locals or as overseasers, terms encompassing those Chinese who had repatriated (usually) from the west with a western education and/or work experience. The third group, the Outer Chinese, was discussed in conjunction with the Chinese, although they were also referred as expatriates from the local Chinese co-worker perspective. Outer Chinese is a staffing group with a pan-Chinese background usually with both English and Chinese language skills, knowledge of both western and Chinese organisational cultures, and values closer to those of Westerners. This group included employees from Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong or Malaysia, for example. In the following direct quotations the terms have also been used interchangeably, but similarly in the interpretation process the terms have been linked to the meaning in which the terms were used in the discussion.

The two main staffing categories (the Westerners and the Chinese) as well as the sub-groups (Locals, Sea Turtles, Outer Chinese, and OEs, Localised Westerners and Newcomer Westerners) derived from the employers’ views are presented in Table II.

The table illustrates the summary of the perceived fit levels (low, partial or high), or the direction of the fit development (decreasing or increasing), if doing so aided comprehension from the four P-E fit perspectives (job, group, organisation and cultural context fit) arranged by the major themes identified as significant from each fit perspective and emerging from the data. This table provides a consolidated employer opinion of the employee groups’ ability to perform the tasks within a particular environment. Low refers to perceived problems in performing the tasks, whereas high highlights a potential for successful implementation.

Table II. Summary of the perceived fit levels by identified staffing groups and major staffing themes

	The Westerners			The Chinese		
	Localised Westerners (SIEs)	Newcomer Westerners (SIEs)	OEs	Locals	Sea Turtles	Outer Chinese
<i>Person to job fit</i>						
Professional KSAs	Partial; high-technical KSAs and international business, some local business skills	Partial; high-technical KSAs and international business, low-local business skills	High-corporate skills, low-local skills	Increasing	High	High
Attitude towards performing/acquiring a job	Partial; getting used to competing against the local talent	Partial; short-term focus	Partial; short-term focus	High	Partial; might perceive themselves superior to the locals	High
<i>Person to group fit</i>						
Local networks and co-worker relationships	High among local Westerners, low among locals	Low	Low	High	Low professional, high-family based or personal	High professional, low-family based or personal
Local management style	Low	Low	Low	High; decreasing among the younger generation	Partial; may occur challenges if the superior is local	Partial; may occur challenges if the superior is local
<i>Person to organisation fit</i>						
Shift in market focus and localisation	Partial; some local business networks	Low	Partial; only corporate tasks	High	High	High
Corporate ethics and values	High	High	High	Low (burden of family-based <i>guanxi</i>), increasing among the younger generation	Partial; accustomed to western customs, no burden of <i>guanxi</i>	Partial; accustomed to western customs, no burden of <i>guanxi</i>
Company embeddedness	High	Low	Low	High, decreasing among the younger generation	High	High
<i>Person to cultural context fit</i>						
Cultural understanding and language skills	Partial; accustomed to living and working in China, inadequate local language skills	Low	Low	High	High	High

Person-job fit

Professional KSAs. Following the rapid economic and technological development of China it has become increasingly easy to find Chinese employees, both local and the Sea Turtles with a high standard of technical and commercial competency that meets or even exceeds western standards. Such availability reduces the need for Westerners in MNCs:

P17: I have come across a lot of talented locals (the Chinese in general). Often they are more talented than the others coming from abroad (referring to Westerners).

With the exception of OEs who usually by dint of their corporate positions are expected to have professional competences to comply with the tasks allocated for them by the HQ, the Westerners (SIEs) were found not to comply with the requirements of the typical positions now available at MNC subsidiaries:

P10: There are people (Localised Westerners and Newcomer Westerners) looking for a job, people that have been to China (working or in business) and refer to themselves as China experts, but they often used to be here as customers and they have been always treated as royals, which the Chinese can do very well, but despite those years, they don't have a clue how to do business here in China. Once you change your role to sales, for example, you are treated completely differently (by the Chinese customers).

In general the past superiority claimed for western employees, both OEs and SIEs, from the professional skills perspective seems to be eroding. The Chinese are increasingly equipped with the qualities valued by the western MNCs thus decreasing the need for Westerners in China. This development continues to decrease the employability of SIEs:

P5: I don't think that there is any need for foreigners (Westerners), I actually would say companies would much rather hire only Chinese that have western high level working experience and education, language, morals and ethics.

Attitude towards performing/acquiring a job. Fit with the job was also discussed in conjunction with candidates' attitudes towards performing or acquiring a job. When contrasting two main staffing groups, the Locals were perceived as demonstrating more hunger for learning and success than other counterparts, which was felt to decrease the employability and fit of the Westerners in general, both OE and SIEs:

P17: They (the Chinese) are well prepared to be ambitious and to learn and they get ahead quite fast. Hardworking, ambitious, and often they beat the qualifications or the effectiveness of the expats (Westerners in general). They compete quite well actually.

Despite high levels of professional KSAs and their fit from many aspects, from the staffing perspective, the Sea Turtles were associated with some problem areas that reflect the traditional Chinese respect for superiors and authority:

P11: We have also had these (Sea Turtles). When they come back they think you are much better than the others, and I guess also the Locals think they are better somehow. They always remember to refer to their backgrounds and are very good at delegating. To make sure the others do their jobs.

The informants also reported concerns over Westerners' attitudes to acquiring a job and subsequently performing the tasks required. It was felt that Localised Westerners with long-term experience of living in China in particular tended to consider themselves superior to the locals and to think that their work experience in China would automatically open managerial positions in western subsidiaries to them:

P1: And then there are these (localised) Westerners who want to change location in China, particularly the weather and pollution in Beijing is causing a lot of trouble. They send in their CVs and then start wondering why we won't provide them jobs. But it's not our policy and there is no need for that, maybe the situation was like that in the past, but if there is an opening, they are considered together with the other candidates, put on the same line, which is not very well taken.

Overall when contrasting the employability of SIEs to other staffing groups their fit particularly from the technical and international aspects was reported as high, but low against the Chinese when considering general attitude towards performing and executing work tasks.

Person-group fit

Local networks, and co-worker relationships. Although the economic growth and opportunities for personal prosperity are causing typical Chinese behaviour to shift towards a more competitive and individualistic form, Chinese organisational behaviour still relies strongly on personal relationships built over generations. Despite the MNC subsidiary's ethical standards or well-defined business procedures, these Chinese behaviour models seem to influence how the groups interact among themselves:

P14: The games they (Chinese) play among themselves are so complex. The Westerners cannot figure that out at all. It's always about knowing somebody and exchanging favours, any kinds that can be inherited from the past.

In addition, the need for teamwork, group cohesion and elaboration among the Chinese was emphasised, whereas the individualistic working attitude of Westerners, both OEs and SIEs was seen as an attribute reducing the fit with the group and thus as something that did not contribute to the success of the whole Chinese subsidiary:

P4: In the west, people are more individualistic whereas in China more is done in teams, through elaboration, nobody takes credit. Westerners tend to start doing it their own way. This tends to cause friction and then your teams are not aligned and they are not successful, and there are problems because of these intercultural actions and issues. Also the means of getting things done are driving the Westerners crazy.

P4: There are people (the Chinese in general) already here with skills, Chinese language and talent, they are already here. If somebody (SIE) is coming straight over it's a big risk. You are already competing against those having been here (Localised Westerners), the local Chinese, the "Over Seasers", those coming back (Sea Turtles). They (the Chinese) are very bright and well educated and willing to work for less, with no culture problems.

Similarly Westerners' lack of ability and willingness to invest in personal (local) relationships, which are the crucial elements of the Chinese culture, commonly due to the often temporary nature of their employment, were also seen to have a debilitating effect on group cohesion and therefore to affect the success of the whole group:

P5: The expats (Westerners) are there for 2-3 years for a lot of money. These people never really integrate to the society, they never really learn the language, they don't really care, these people are there just to do their job. So the Chinese people nowadays very fast realise if somebody is good or bad. The Chinese will talk behind their backs about the foreigners, that they a scumbags, horrible, they are here just to make money, and they (Chinese) would not include them (Westerners) in any kind of important things, and in business and life. The Chinese keep the important information secret. They have just the necessary amount of contact if they realise that this is a typical foreigner standing there, thinking they are better but there is actually no performance behind it.

Local management style. Although MNC subsidiaries typically tend to apply the best management practice established in western businesses, the paternalistic leadership style of the Chinese remains strong among the Chinese. Therefore Westerners, even Localised Westerners with local language skills and cultural understanding, were not perceived as the best option when the position required working under a local Chinese superior with expectations of respect, control and deference:

P11: I cannot imagine a westerner with a local superior, a westerner working for a local in a western company. It would be totally crazy putting a westerner into any middle manager position or similar, even if he spoke Chinese, it just would not make any sense if one is too different from the others. The Chinese on the other hand always need the presence of the manager, everyday management on an hourly or minute-by-minute basis depending on the level. The way they operate is very hierarchical and army like, no westerner can take that.

Although there are challenges connected to collectivism, high-power distance and uncertainty avoidance, these challenges not only relate to the Westerners, both OEs or SIEs alike, but also seem to be valid for the other staffing groups like the younger generation of Locals, Sea Turtles or Outer Chinese. These groups with a western education or professional influence may also be more accustomed to the western participative management style, and that can cause friction with the fit to a group with a more traditional Chinese management style:

P17: The younger generation (of Chinese) prefers to work for the western companies and contribute to how things are done, particularly in the middle management. There is a clear change in there. There are also some Chinese that have lived abroad or studied there (Sea Turtles). But when they come back they see themselves as premium compared to locals,

they want the senior positions. Also they might not be used to be managed by a Chinese manager with his Chinese ways, for example. I think that's why they prefer working for the European companies and that's why we find competent and ambitious people. (Why?) I think it's the corporate culture, not so army like, nobody is asking and commanding all the time, they have an opportunity to do and plan their job without being managed all the time.

On the other hand, contemporary western management practices, such as virtual corporate management were seen as problematic for the Locals, as they are used to a more tangible management style:

P2: For the Chinese it is difficult to work in an environment in which the boss might be on the other side of the world or running a matrix organisation.

On the whole, when considering the person to group fit, neither type of SIEs was found to fit, particularly not with local co-workers and superiors. This omission was connected to cultural elements and the typical organisational behaviour models of the Chinese that conflicted with those of Westerners.

Person-organisation fit

Shift in market focus and localisation. Western MNCs do not retain their operations in China only because of its cheaper labour force. Recently the strategic focus of many of the western MNCs operating in China has been extended to focus on the internal Chinese markets rather than being just a manufacturing hub for global markets. There are also an increasing number of MNC subsidiaries with decades of operative experience in China that have less need for knowledge transfer, communication and control than they once did. That strategy shift and experience of the local markets also have an impact on the organisational structures and tasks, and the increasing degree of localisation:

P20: Well, we have already been here for decades, so there are only some percentage of expats (OEs). In my unit in which I was working as an MD there were only two other Westerners (OEs), the others were Locals or the Outer Chinese.

Localisation was not however perceived as easily attained. Specifically, a well-defined balance between the Chinese and Westerners was perceived as important in order to assure that the strategies and targets defined by the HQ were delivered. The challenges of the localisation often seemed to be connected to the

traditional Chinese organisational behaviour and need for maintaining corporate control over the subsidiary activities:

P11: Localisation is about finding the right balance. If you have too many Expats (OEs) they (the Chinese) never start thinking for themselves and start developing or making decisions, but if there are too few, you will soon lose control.

Corporate ethics and values. Despite the recognised need for localisation to match the revised strategies and goals of the subsidiaries, there were concerns over the functionality of the localisation and how well the localisation approach and the values of local staff would suit the corporate ethical standards and values:

P6: I have really changed my opinion since I came here. I used to think that we need to localise more and better, but now after my experience here I am sure that there must always be a certain balance, between the locals and expats, we must be able to find and challenge certain aspects and certain Chinese approaches that just do not match the values of the company all the time.

P11: If there is a western company in China run by a local manager, all the profit will certainly be used for the benefit of the locals. Surely nothing will be sent to the HQ. They tend to think that all the money belongs to the locals.

Hence, despite the reported declining need for Westerners in general, there are still some functional areas where there is a demand for OEs. These functions are often connected to finance and control or general management, due to concerns over the compliance with ethical standards in the subsidiary:

P14: If you look at the financial control function, there are not too many companies (MNCs) with no trusted expats (OEs) in that function, who are following the money flows, trying to keep it clean. There is this ethical standard, but there is still corruption and bribery and the odds are high in this Chinese system. That is simply the reality.

For these challenges the Outer Chinese with no family-based *guanxi* (and the obligations it brings in China), more western values, and both educational and cultural backgrounds were considered a suitable staffing group:

P11: The Outer Chinese, on the other hand, like employees from Hong Kong or Taiwan, they don't have the family ties here, although they speak Chinese and everything, they are considered more like expats by the locals. They won't start with that (local) Chinese vickery.

Company embeddedness. Another focus area from the staffing perspective is the high- employee attrition rate. Newcomer Westerners targeting employment in China were considered a particular staffing risk. The respondents viewed them as often taking short-term assignments without developing much job and organisational commitment, and perceived them as more of a nuisance than as contributors to strategic goals. For other foreign staffing groups – OEs, Localised Westerners or Outer Chinese – attrition was not mentioned as an issue to be considered in staffing:

P12: You meet a lot of western people who say "I love China, I want to come to China". They come here for a year and then they disappear. From the company perspective we spend a lot of time training them and mentoring them and you spend a lot of energy by being a manager, you want to give that opportunity but on the other hand you don't want to spend a lot of resources on short-term assignments.

However, high-labour attrition rates and low job commitment are not issues restricted to the western SIEs, but are increasingly typical of the younger generation of Chinese, whether Locals or Sea Turtles. As a result of economic growth and a wide range of job opportunities with the western MNCs and local organisations alike, they have been able to learn international business practices locally, and thus choose the employers offering the best salary and benefit packages. This trend has created an issue of frequent job-hopping:

P14: I can tell you that it is difficult to find local talent (Chinese) that would stay in a company. There are a lot of opportunities available and if the salary does not develop fast enough, they will change employer pretty fast. The Chinese are "the face" people they also consider what is good for their image.

P17: This job-hopping is a clear hurdle for development, but it is also an opportunity. If your employee goes to another firm, in a way that might be good for business, having your own man in there.

In summary, both types of SIEs were considered to have a high fit with the corporate ethics and values whereas on company embeddedness particularly Newcomer Westerners were considered a staffing group with low commitment.

Localised Westerners on the other hand, due to their living and work experience in the host country, were considered a less risky staffing alternative.

Person-cultural context fit

Cultural understanding and language skills. Despite the need for fit with the job, group and organisation, the most important fit from the staffing point of view seems to be the fit with the cultural context, a concept with a tendency to spill over into other types of fits as pinpointed in the findings above. All staffing professionals emphasised the need for cultural understanding and skill in the local language particularly for all positions not assigned via HQ. Despite the high levels of professional KSAs that would provide the fit with the job, for the western SIEs, the lack of cultural understanding and language skills seem to create hurdles that hinder their opportunities for staffing:

P4: So you (Western SIE) really need to be exceptional in order to get a job. So if you really don't have the skills (professional skills, cultural and language skills) in need here, it's not a really good idea to come.

P2: We are trying to find Chinese, because we are here (in China). Although the nationality should not be a key driver (for staffing), there are not so many Westerners who could perform in China, among the Chinese, or in sales for instance, it is so different here.

In summary, western SIEs were perceived as having a low level of employability for the MNC subsidiary staffing purposes in China when contrasted to other identified staffing groups. This conclusion seems to apply particularly to subsidiaries with a strategic focus on the internal markets or those at the more mature localisation phase. Informants did however present suggestions for alternative employers for those determined to make a career in China. SIEs were suggested to have the best employment prospects with western companies at an early stage of business development in China, the ones located in lower tier cities. An alternative suggested was local Chinese companies in need of knowledge transfer or seeking a more international focus:

P11: Bringing in the Westerners (Newcomer SIEs), in my opinion, is the last option. It just doesn't make any sense, why would I do that? Of course it is not out of the question, if you have a need to build up an organisation and need for growth and you just have not found any other alternatives, but it is a huge risk for the company, particularly in China.

The overall perception with regard to employing western SIEs over other alternative staffing groups was that it was a risky option, particularly in respect of Newcomer Westerners in a host country cultural context. From the fit perspective, there seemed to be a clear preference for the local talent, and particularly for the increasing number of Chinese candidates with international work experience either in China or abroad.

Discussion

This study aims to enhance our understanding of MNC subsidiary staffing and the employability of western SIEs in comparison to other identified staffing groups from the fit perspective in China. To do so it posed the research questions:

RQ1. How is the employability of SIEs viewed by MNCs in comparison to other staffing groups in China from a fit perspective, and what drives those perceptions of fit?

The research question was addressed by contrasting four aspects of P-E fit (person to job, to group, to organisation and to cultural context), and the main prevailing staffing perspectives.

This qualitative study makes two key contributions. First, it contributes to the SIE literature by incorporating the employer perspective into the study of SIE fit and employability. And second, the study contributes to the global staffing literature by examining global staffing from an MNC subsidiary perspective in China. The majority of SIE studies, particularly in cross-cultural career settings, have focused on the subjective SIE career experiences (e.g. Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010; Arp et al., 2013; Isakovic et al., 2013; Luring and Selmer, 2014; Muir et al., 2014; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014; Von Borell de Araujo et al., 2013). The employer perspective adds to our understanding of SIE careers and how they are seen in comparison to other staffing groups. This helps us to build a more complete picture of SIEs, their characteristics and their careers.

Regarding the SIE literature, the current study illustrates how SIEs are not a homogenous group from the employer perspective, but comprise two different groups – Newcomer Westerners and Localised Westerners – each with a distinctive fit profile. Localised Westerners due to their work and living experience in a host country unsurprisingly have higher levels of fit from the group and cultural context perspective than their peers who lack such experience. Expatriates in general, excluding Newcomer Westerners, seem less likely to change employers in the short term than the Chinese. This is perhaps due to China's stringent immigration and residency regulations (Pieke, 2012)

according to which foreigners must be employed before they will be granted leave to remain in the country. Newcomer Westerners, lacking the cultural understanding and language skills that would contribute to other fit categories, were thus considered an option of last resort from the staffing perspective.

Interestingly, the findings highlight how despite the increasing volume of SIEs working worldwide (Jokinen et al., 2008; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012) as a group they remain an under-used staffing option among western MNCs in China. This might be due to China's stringent immigration and residency policies that aim to limit the number of "excess foreigners" in the country (Pieke, 2012) and hence the flow of Westerners looking for employment in China. Another reason could be the low levels of fit of Westerners compared to their Chinese counterparts. The number of ambitious local workers with high or growing levels of fit in all four-fit categories is rapidly increasing, and recruiters are increasingly viewing these people as able to meet the demands of corporate strategy focus shifts and localisation trends (Worm et al., 2001; Fryxell et al., 2004; Hartmann et al., 2010). Although SIEs have been suggested to be an effective yet cheaper alternative to hiring costly OEs (Peltokorpi and Froese, 2009), the findings of this study are in line with the suggestion of Tharenou (2013) that SIEs have seldom been considered an option to fill top managerial positions, which have always generally been reserved for trusted OEs. Consequently, western SIEs are seen as a problematic, temporary and risky staffing group for MNC subsidiaries in China. Contrary to the suggestions in the literature (Froese and Peltokorpi, 2013; Tharenou, 2013), SIEs are less likely to perform well and difficulties in working efficiently with local co-workers, superiors, or in the challenging cultural context as a whole are to be expected. This finding might help us explain why SIEs often consider themselves in a weaker position or having less development opportunities than their co-workers during their employment (Biemann and Andresen, 2010).

Second, this study contributes to cross-cultural staffing literature by contextualising staffing and discussing how employers see different staffing groups in China, and why one staffing group might be perceived as better for a particular strategic concern than another (cf. Tarique et al., 2006). Surprisingly, there was still a prevalent strong bipolarity between the two main staffing categories; the Chinese and the Westerners. This distinction, instead of using a traditional western staffing approach focused on the fit between the job requirements, and a candidate's education, past experience, and cognitive skills (Aycan, 2005), might still reflect a perceived division of the staffing groups based on their ethnic backgrounds and anticipated cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1984, 2001). On the other hand, this distinction does recognise the

importance of fit in the group, organisation, and cultural context perspectives, and highlights the necessity of an ability to perform and accomplish the tasks and strategic goals within the particular cultural context (Hofstede, 1991). An ideal candidate could therefore be profiled as an individual who is able to comply with corporate goals and strategies, develop their embeddedness in the company, and moreover work in accordance with corporate ethics and values, while respecting the host country culture.

However, the findings illustrate how neither individuals nor organisations operate in a vacuum. Instead, each type of fit is interconnected to the others, in a way that is similar to how we understand and perceive a fit evolves over time and may appear to be different in one context from another. Therefore how the gatekeepers – those individuals responsible for staffing – in western MNC subsidiaries perceive different dimensions of fit today, may change tomorrow, or if contrasted to the perceptions of their peers in a local Chinese organisation looking for talent. The findings therefore do not only highlight the strong presence of the perceptions of gatekeepers on the values and behaviour models of each staffing group, but also how those perceptions may affect staffing decisions (Rynes and Gerhard, 1990). Referring to cultural dimensions (e.g. Hofstede, 1984, 2001) has become a convenient way to explain the values of employees or certain employee groups in terms of how culture contributes to behaviour and strategies at the individual level (Fischer and Poortinga, 2012). However, it is worth questioning the applicability of such perceptions by supporting the critical discussion over the stability and validity of such cultural dimensions (Kirkman et al., 2006). For example, Minkov and Hofstede (2014) have pinpointed how national cultural traits should not be generalised to all individuals or generations throughout nations. That observation is particularly true in rapidly developing countries like China (Minkov and Blagoev, 2009). That country has witnessed fundamental changes in its social values and work ethic, and exhibits an obvious interplay between the traditional values and contemporary social forces (Leung, 2008). These changes, supporting the previous literature (Cooke, 2009) are particularly apparent in the attitudes of younger and older generations that also reflect the level of fits. Interestingly, however, despite the recognised cultural disparities among Westerners (Hofstede, 1984, 2001), the informants interviewed on their staffing approach here tended to consider them a uniform staffing group with shared values and behaviour models. Perhaps the perceived values and behaviour models among the Westerners could still be considered smaller from the staffing perspective than the distinction between the Westerners and the Chinese.

The findings also reveal how the relatively recent concept of the SIE (Suutari and Brewster, 2000) does not fit the prevalent staffing terminology of PCNs, HCNs and TCNs (cf. Perlmutter, 1969; Wind et al., 1973) based on country of origin of the staffing groups or capacity to meet the practical needs of MNC staffing. In practice, SIEs can be of any nationality or/and cultural background, and could therefore be placed in any of the categories. The country of origin offers a limited basis for making generalisable points on employability. Hence, the complementary inclusion of the fit perspective deepens our understanding of employability, not only of SIEs but also of other staffing groups.

Practical implications

The current contextualised study helps explain how MNC staffing is culturally bound and staffing decisions should not be based merely on job-related qualifications. As a whole and building upon the notion of Rynes and Gerhard (1990), the findings underline how the employers' perceptions of fit and employability of each staffing group seem to affect the staffing decisions in a particular socio-cultural environment. This connection between the perceptive characteristics distinguishing the members of the group or individuals of a certain country or cultural background (Hofstede, 1984, 2001) (the Westerners vs the Chinese), and the requirements of job, organisation, group and cultural context might help explain some of the staffing challenges facing an MNC, but also the perceptions of the underemployment of SIEs (Lee, 2005), or even discrimination among migrants looking for work opportunities in west (Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010) for example. This confirms how different staffing groups can be seen as having different levels of employability, and why one staffing group might be considered better suited to a particular strategic concern than another (cf. Tarique et al., 2006).

This understanding can help explain the challenges SIEs experience in cross-cultural career settings (Arp et al., 2013; Isakovic et al., 2013; Luring and Selmer, 2014; Muir et al., 2014; Rodriguez and Scurry, 2014; Von Borell de Araujo et al., 2013). The understanding of the employability of competing staffing groups and their levels of fit may on the other hand provide career opportunities for those SIEs with special skills in short supply locally (Tharenou, 2013). This understanding may also provide practical guidance for the increasing number of western SIEs considering career moves to China, or to other culturally distant career contexts who lack prior expatriate experience or contextual understanding. This understanding provides grounds for gaining a fit on those aspects in need of enhancement. The findings also underline the on-going need

for knowledge transfer among local organisations targeting internationalisation, and MNCs operating in developing, but as yet less attractive areas of China.

Considering the employers' perspective, this study does illustrate the variety of different staffing alternatives available and the employability of some of those groups of people in China. This study equally highlights the need to develop HRM practices capable of meeting the demands of all staffing groups. Therefore, the identification of different staffing groups and their specific characteristics, combined with the use of an extended person-to-environment fit perspective in staffing, provide tools not only to recognise suitable candidates for different types of positions, but also to develop HRM practices that could help to both motivate and retain them. Similarly, despite the potential challenges in cross-cultural staffing settings, SIEs continue to be a staffing group worth considering.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study revealed how SIEs are an underrepresented group in the global staffing literature, and the present study is one of the first to explain their careers from the employers' perspective. More empirical studies from that perspective would be welcome.

This research highlights the perceptions of western staffing professionals in the Chinese staffing context and so represents only one mono-dimensional approach to cross-cultural careers in geographically and culturally distant environments. There is also a strong presence of informants of Nordic origin, suggesting certain cultural values (Hofstede, 1984, 2001) that are distinct to those of the Chinese; a factor that may thus have the potential to introduce bias. It follows that there is a need for research in other settings or research that canvasses the opinions of local staffing professionals. Other research settings might also reveal distinctive staffing categories that differ from the novelty of the Chinese labour market context. Following the remarks of Minkov and Hofstede (2014) and Minkov and Blagoev (2009) employer perceptions presented in this study are based on experience or perceptions of the characteristics of each staffing group. For example, MNC subsidiaries in labour markets like China might be assumed to attract individuals with certain skills profiles. The analytical generalisations presented in this study cannot and should not therefore be applied to all individuals within a certain staffing group. Staffing groups in other staffing settings may appear very distinctive and would therefore be worth exploring.

The other limitation is the sample size; however, using 24 informants was in line with suggestions in the literature (Creswell, 1994; Yin, 2014), and given the richness of the data met the data saturation purposes of this study (Yin, 2014).

This contextualised study does not take into account the effects of the field of industry, the physical location of the subsidiary, the extent of localisation or the strategic orientation of the subsidiary on anything more than the general level. Those elements, however, could be significant when assessing the staffing of subsidiaries in China, and so could offer fruitful avenues for further studies. Similarly, studies of the career experiences of western SIEs in local organisations would reveal more about their employability and fit in China. The findings also reveal the need to study positions other than top management team positions for mobile employees in international staffing settings, as well as the need for an updated taxonomy of staffing groups and cultural dimensions that would also take into account the differences between career orientations within those groups.

Most importantly, the findings of this study are based on subjective, value-based and context-related experiences and observations of staffing professionals with direct staffing experience in China. Their perceptions do not represent the official recruitment policies of their employers. All informants, despite their efforts to generalise for the purpose of this study, emphasised the uniqueness of their staffing and recruiting processes. Hence, although the study highlights the challenging position of western SIEs in China, the findings should not be taken as evidence of the overall decrease or increase in staffing opportunities for individual SIEs looking for career opportunities in MNC subsidiaries in China.

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Career self-management behaviour of Western self-initiated expatriates in local organizations in China

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The available literature on self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) is generally based on the assumption that SIEs are protean in character and manage their careers independently. The current qualitative empirical study offers an alternative to this assumption, using 23 interviews with Western SIEs employed by local organizations in China to examine how and why SIEs target obtaining a labour market fit through career self-management behaviour, particularly in culturally distant career contexts. The assessment of the career self-management behaviour of Western SIEs was undertaken using King's framework (2004). Three approaches to self-management behaviour were identified based on the motivation and outcome expectations of SIEs: labour market entry, employability maintenance and career advancement. The research illustrates the flexible and dynamic nature of career self-management behaviour and reflects individuals' revised career expectations and the employment context of the host country. The findings contribute to the extant theory on SIEs by illustrating emerging means of realizing international careers in cross-cultural career contexts, and the significance of third-party initiatives supporting expatriation facilitated by the Internet and social media.

Keywords: career self-management behaviour; China; employability; fit; self-initiated expatriates

Introduction

It has been said that 'most people want to believe that their careers are their own property, and efforts to shape the direction of their careers provide them with a means to assert agency in their life course' (Tiedeman & Miller-Tiedman, 1984 in King, 2004, p. 113). As careers in the West become ever less predictable, individuals increasingly need to focus on the accumulation of career capital self-directly as it develops as they move from one organization to another. This applies particularly to individuals who as a result of the employability dilemma (the unbalanced location of labour supply and demand within particular industry sectors or a geographical area (Makkonen, 2013)) seek employment in emerging labour markets. China – as a rapidly developing labour market – and particularly its local employers looking for talent are becoming attractive career options for Westerners (Makkonen, 2014) in such position. In contrast to MNCs operating in China, which are typically focused on localization (Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010), local organizations can still provide career and employment opportunities that may outweigh those available in the West. This applies particularly to SIEs who are able to 'self-initiate their international relocation, with the intentions of regular employment and temporary stay' (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014, p. 1293). Their circumstances differ from those of organization-sent expatriates (OEs) and SIEs are often suggested to be in a weaker position. These arguments stem from the notion of SIEs not being part of the employer's

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long-term human resource management plans due to their often-temporary employment status (Cerdin, 2008). In addition, SIEs may earn less than OEs, receive less structural support from their overseas employers and have fewer career development opportunities (Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008). Despite the difficulties in accurately estimating the number of SIEs globally, they currently represent a significant and increasing international staffing population (Jokinen et al., 2008; Peltokorpi and Froese, 2012). As such, they are a theoretically important example of self-directed Westerners employed in cross-cultural career settings in culturally distant career contexts.

It has been argued that individuals are capable and willing of managing their careers (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). Similarly SIE literature assumes that SIEs are interested in remaining competitive (Clarke, 2009), being self-managed (Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011) and taking measures to support their career development (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001) and employability (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010). However, the available research does not clarify how and why SIEs actually use career self-management behaviour. Therefore, this qualitative study intends to reveal the insider perspectives on the career self-management behaviour of SIEs by addressing the question: *How and why do SIEs use career self-management behaviour?*

Three assumptions were made to enable the assessment. The first is that individuals choose career paths and environments they perceive to provide a good fit (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), but the second is that individuals cannot always influence how their careers develop, as this is dependent on the decision-making of gatekeepers and the relevant career context (King, 2004). The third assumption is that enhanced self-management behaviour (see Richardson & Zikic, 2007) will be particularly important in an emerging and culturally distant career context where traditional Western organizational behaviour models may not be valid. Against this background, a context of local organizations in emerging labour markets, which increasingly offer career opportunities for mobile Westerners (Arp, 2013; Makkonen, 2014; Simon & Cao, 2009), provides a theoretically rich, complex but also under-studied setting in which to study career self-management behaviour among Western SIEs in China.

Despite China's emerging significance, it has often been reported to be the most challenging expatriation location for Westerners (Brookfield, 2013) to comprehend and work in efficiently (Lassere & Ching, 1997). Challenges may stem for example from typical Chinese organizational behaviour, which is based on the concept of long-term group membership (*guanxi*) (Leung, 2012). From this perspective, foreigners in general are usually treated as members of an out-group. Accordingly, they are likely to receive less social or professional support from local co-workers or superiors than would be offered to locals (Varma, Budhwar, & Pichler, 2011). The Chinese also creates issues for foreigners (Lauring and Selmer, 2011). Such challenges have been cited as reasons for expatriates leaving a host country (Cao, Hirschi, & Deller, 2013). The notion suggests that expatriate workers require some different strategies for managing their careers than those used by expatriates working in the West. In fact, it is clear that those working for local organizations in China or in any other culturally distant career context should have a well-developed cultural understanding and strong communicative abilities (Peltokorpi & Clausen, 2011).

The current research offers contributions both to the literature on self-initiated expatriation and to that on careers. It complements SIE literature by illustrating how SIEs apply a range of career self-management behaviours to manage their careers, and in so doing, take personal responsibility for them. This study explores the subjective SIE career

experiences in culturally distant labour markets and local organizations (cf. Briscoe, Schuler, & Claus, 2009; Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997) that deviate from the Western management paradigm. Recently, there has also been a call for this approach to be reviewed (Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014). The current study also contributes to the existing theory related to SIEs by illustrating the emerging methods of realizing international careers in cross-cultural career contexts through exploiting the potential of the Internet and social media. The study also reveals the significance of third-party intercession as a facilitator of self-initiated expatriation, particularly in career contexts difficult to access through self-directed behaviour. Second, the study contributes to the career literature by discussing whether career self-management behaviour actually has an impact on employee mobility choices or career success (Baruch, Budhwar, & Khatri, 2007; Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy Demuth, 2006; Cao et al., 2013). This insight is provided by empirically examining the career self-management behaviour of Western SIEs by using King's framework of career self-management behaviour (2004).

Literature review

Self-initiated expatriates and their motives for expatriation

There are many definitions of SIEs. Traditional descriptions depict young, well-educated individuals from the Western world, holding good positions in developed countries, and with clear career and development goals, which have decided to become mobile (Doherty, 2013; Inkson et al., 1997). They have also been defined as 'individuals who travel abroad (usually as tourists or students) but who seek work as they travel and are hired in the foreign location, often by firms from their home country' (Briscoe et al., 2009, p. 169). There have recently been attempts to re-define SIEs and their qualities, particularly in comparison to OEs (Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld, & Dickmann, 2014; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). The most distinctive factors separating SIEs from OEs are the initial motivator, change of work contract partner and type of mobility (Andresen et al., 2014). Moreover, for SIEs, the length of stay is often not predetermined, they tend to remain expatriates longer than OEs and they seldom have any repatriation plans (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). In the case of OEs, their mobility is inter-organizational and they tend to work within the same organizational boundaries for a predetermined length of time without changing contract partner (Andresen et al., 2014). SIEs also often have limited communication ability, particularly in culturally and linguistically distant cultures (Peltokorpi & Clausen, 2011; Selmer, 2006) and tend to be less satisfied with working under the supervision of the host country managers (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2014). Furthermore, their career progression is less predictable, owing to changing employer more frequently than their OE counterparts (Biemann & Andresen, 2010). SIE careers are also said to attract more women than men (Tharenou, 2010), although that view is not unanimous (cf. Thorn, 2009).

Existing research has puzzled over what motivates SIEs. SIEs are less likely than OEs to accumulate career benefits from their stay (Baruch, Dickmann, Altman, & Bournois, 2013). Therefore, SIEs are more likely to draw their motivation from economic and lifestyle benefits, or a personal interest in the location and host country culture (Doherty et al., 2011). Other motivational factors proposed in the literature include the desire to gain international experience, to escape weak labour markets in the home country (Froese, 2012), prior experience of mobility, age, family and personal career development priorities (Richardson, 2006; Thorn, 2009). They may also often have a personal interest in the host country, or relationships that facilitate employment with local organizations (Doherty et al., 2011).

However, regardless of the expected positive outcomes, there may also be dynamic elements that transform over time as individuals' careers and lives evolve (Doherty, 2013). Those elements can constrain how expatriates in general perceive their relocation experience. These elements include for example anxiety caused by exposure to a new culture (Peltokorpi & Froese, 2014), frustrating working conditions (Crites, 1969, pp. 404–406), and they can spawn concerns over the risk of not benefiting from the experience and with regard to achievement in the future (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). In addition, particularly the temporary nature of the SIE assignment (Cerdin, 2008) and its potential to adversely affect personal relationships (Richardson & Zikic, 2007) may affect the decision to expatriate or to continue an expatriate life.

Career self-management behaviour of self-initiated expatriates

It is not surprising that the SIE research has often led them to be connected to ideas of protean (Hall, 1996) and boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). A protean attitude refers to adopting proactive career self-management behaviours (Seibert et al., 2001) to achieve the desired career outcomes (King, 2004). Proactivity is thus likely to manifest in the form of career resilience, exemplified by characteristics such as self-confidence, a willingness to take risks and a need for achievement. It is also connected to behaviour central to creating career networks, such as preparedness for job mobility and seeking developmental feedback, as well as coping with work stress and challenges, and adjusting to changes in the organization and environment (Chiaburu, Baker, & Pitariu, 2006). Boundaryless careers are those that are 'the opposite of organizational careers' with internal boundaries (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996, p. 6). In the context of international careers, the term has also been understood to refer to career opportunities not constrained by national boundaries.

Self-management behaviour is behaviour that is often connected to a protean attitude and is used to achieve desired career outcomes (King, 2004) and perceptions of fit. Fit is a sense of how well an individual fits in the particular context and how the context meets the individual's psychological and physical needs (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Edwards, Caplan, & Harrison, 1998). However, there is an ongoing discussion over whether self-management behaviour actually affects SIE mobility choices or career success, or if SIEs are capable of influencing their own career outcomes at all. There are both positive (Briscoe et al., 2006; Cao et al., 2013) and negative findings (Baruch et al., 2007). King (2004) has pointed out that self-management behaviour might be more typical of those who are naturally highly motivated and skilled, while employees with more traditional career approaches are more passive and look to their employers for support (Briscoe et al., 2006). In addition, efficient type of career self-management behaviours might not always be easily transferred from one context to another (King, 2004). Therefore, the discussion on different types of career self-management behaviour strategies in culturally distant career contexts is increasingly relevant for a growing number of SIEs from various career backgrounds seeking to manage and advance their careers, often without the support of their employers (Biemann & Andresen, 2010).

King's framework of career self-management behaviour

In order to conceptualize career self-management behaviour and facilitate understanding of the reasons for particular self-management behaviour, King (2004) developed a framework of career self-management based on Crites' (1969) model of vocational

adjustment. The framework is based on the tendency of individuals to seek acceptance, prestige and recognition along with greater freedom in their employment. Any conditions that may prevent this, such as frustration or perceived misfit, may result in actions designed to eliminate the problem. King's conceptual framework is based on the assumption that individuals cannot always influence how their careers are developing, as they are dependent on the intervention of gatekeepers and the contextual factors in the particular labour market. Gatekeepers are those with influence on career outcomes who may also have personal, competing or political interests.

Individuals use three types of behaviour (strategies) in order to achieve the desired career outcomes that intent to influence those gatekeepers: positioning, influence and boundary management behaviour. Positioning behaviour consists of the elements of strategic choice of mobility and investment in human capital that are based on deliberate choices between alternatives; activating both internal and external network development to gather information about job openings and job content innovation used in the performance of tasks, or joining special projects that are valued by the employer (King, 2004). Influencing behaviour is typified by 'active attempts to influence the gatekeepers' (King, 2004, p. 120), networks and decision makers. This behaviour might manifest in self-promotion so an individual ensures they appear in the best possible light. It may also occur through ingratiating behaviour towards the gatekeepers; or in what is termed upward influence that aims to ensure the employee is visible to the gatekeepers and attempts to foster the idea that the employee is indispensable (King, 2004). Boundary management behaviour on the other hand focuses on managing the demands of the job and on non-work domains such as family life by means of boundary maintenance and role transition. Boundary maintenance targets ensure the effectiveness of both work and non-work roles, whereas role transition aims to separate the two domains (King, 2004).

Nevertheless, current SIE literature is typically based on the assumption that SIEs are protean individuals (Doherty, 2013; Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000) who utilize career self-management behaviour (Briscoe et al., 2006). That same literature however has not adequately explained how and why self-management behaviour is used. This knowledge would assist in understanding the self-directed careers of Westerners, particularly in the cross-cultural career contexts where the distinctive culture and organizational behaviour are challenging (e.g. Arp, 2013; Isakovic, bin Mohammed, & Whitman, 2013; Makkonen, 2013; Muir, Wallace, & McMurray, 2014; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014). King's (2004) framework was perceived as suitable to assess the contextual nature of the self-management behaviour due to its roots in the theory of vocational adjustment. The choice was also influenced by the aim to provide richness, depth, detail and a deeper understanding of the concept of career self-management among SIEs.

Method

This qualitative study is based on a recent but growing phenomenon in a real-life context (Yin, 2014), that being Western SIEs employed in local organizations in China. Local organizations in this study refer only to firms that are fully Chinese owned and managed. These local businesses represent a neglected and under-studied research context despite their emerging international economic and technological importance (Simon & Cao, 2009) as an employment destination for mobile Westerners (Makkonen, 2013).

In the context of the constructivist paradigm, interviews were selected as a suitable method as it was important to allow the interviewees to express their views in their own words, while the researcher maintained control over the process. Interviews are regarded

as suitable instruments for obtaining highly personalized data with a good return rate (David & Sutton, 2004, p. 214), providing freedom to follow new leads as they arise and to identify new ways of understanding the topic (Bernard, 1988). The subjective nature of the study required finding informants with an insider perspective (Oakley, 2000) who could provide deep and rich explanations of the topic (Prasad & Prasad, 2002).

The participants were selected on a purposive sampling basis by choosing only Westerners who had freely chosen to move to China to work for a local organization. This method ensured the selection of only those who could provide information to facilitate and improve the understanding of the issue at hand (Saunders, 2012). The search for participants started by using two individuals known to the author who had a history of working as SIEs in local organizations in China. These contacts were subsequently used to find other Westerners with matching experience through initiating a snowballing effect. The approach provided access to potential informants and personal support for a study on a relatively sensitive topic. In order to avoid potential uniformity bias arising from the snowball method, the sample was complemented by use of the social media application, *LinkedIn*. *LinkedIn* proved to be the most efficient way of identifying SIEs of various nationalities working for local organizations in several parts of China (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong province). Diligent attempts to locate more female SIEs working in local organizations were unsuccessful, and only two were found. In spite of this disappointment, the sample used offers differing viewpoints that can be verified against each other and provide a 'rich picture of the attitudes, needs and behaviour of those under scrutiny' as suggested by Shenton (2004, p. 66). Twenty-three Western SIEs of 11 nationalities, and different age groups and vocational backgrounds with current or previous SIE work experience in local organizations in China were interviewed in 2013. Informants that were still working in China were interviewed in person and SIEs who had repatriated were interviewed via Skype. This number of informants was appropriate to meet the purpose of data saturation. They were also free of any influence of organizational gatekeepers, enabling them to participate anonymously and withdraw from the research at any time.

Socio-demographic profiles of these SIEs are presented in Table 1.

Following the suggestion of Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004), a 'language equality' approach was adopted in the interviews for those informants sharing a mother tongue with the author ($n = 7$). For the other non-native English speakers ($n = 12$), the 'mutual disadvantage' approach was applied by using English as the language of interviews. All the other interviews were conducted in English, but none was conducted in Chinese. The advantages of these approaches are the building of good rapport, allowing participants to express themselves fully and enabling a cultural understanding of their statements.

The interviews followed a conversational interview guide intended to provide insights into the research question (Saunders and Rojon, 2014). In order to ensure flexibility and responsiveness as well as opportunities for discussing themes that could not be planned in advance, the questions were not directly planned to serve the purposes of the framework. Instead, the interviews were conducted in a conversational style that involved asking the informants to describe their experiences and feelings rather than structured questions in a strict order. The approach prompted a considerable amount of probing as new issues emerged (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This equally supported the conscious intention for nonlinear research process that consisted of active interplay between the existing framework and the empirical findings. In other words, the theoretical framework evolved simultaneously with the gathering of empirical observations, and there was a constant overlap of data analysis and data collection as proposed by Eisenhardt (1989). Despite the narrative style, the interviewer ensured the relevant themes were included to

Table 1. Profiles of SIE informants.

Interview identification M (male) / F (female)	Region of origin	Age at the time of interview	Age at the beginning of SIE	Total years in China at the time of interview	Years in industry or profession before SIE	Family status/location at the time of SIE	Previous expatriation experience	SIE initiation type	Repatriation plans in place	Career motivation
P1 (M)	NE	43	42	1	12	Accompanying spouse and small children	No	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P2 (M)	NE	49	47	2	11	Accompanying spouse, grown up children at home	No	Self-initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P3 (M)	NE	44	42	2	15	Accompanying spouse and school aged children for the first year	OE in western country	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P4 (M)	NE	47	42	2 + 2	13	Spouse and children at home	Repatriated SIE from China, re-expatriated to China	Host company initiated	Yes	Advancement
P5 (M)	NE	56	55	1	15	Accompanying spouse, grown up children at home	No	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P6 (M)	NE	43	41	2	8	Accompanying spouse, no children	No	3rd party initiated	No	Advancement
P7 (M)	NE	54	51	3	21	Family at home	No	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P8 (F)	NE	38	37	1	13	Single	OE in western country	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P9 (M)	SA	36	29	2 + 2	0	Accompanying spouse and small children	Repatriated SIE from China, re-expatriated to China	Self-initiated	No	Entry
P10 (M)	NA	52	49	3	11	N on-accompanying spouse, no children	SIE + OE in western country	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P11 (M)	NE	42	40	2	6	Single	No	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance

(Continued)

Table 1 – continued

Interview identification M (male) / F (female)	Region of origin	Age at the time of interview	Age at the beginning of SIE	Total years in China at the time of interview	Years in industry or profession before SIE	Family status/location at the time of SIE	Previous expatriation experience	SIE initiation type	Repatriation plans in place	Career motivation
P12 (M)	SE	40	34	6	1	Accompanying spouse and small children	No	Self-initiated	No	Entry
P13 (M)	NE	40	37	3 + 3	10	Local spouse, no children	OE in China, re-expatriated to China	Self-initiated	No	Advancement
P14 (M)	NE	31	29	2	9	Single	No	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P15 (M)	SA	26	23	3	0	Single	No	Self-initiated	No	Entry
P16 (M)	NE	38	36	2	8	Accompanying spouse, no children	SIE + OE in western country	3rd party initiated	No	Advancement
P17 (M)	NE	28	24	4	3	Single	No	Self-initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P18 (M)	NE	43	41	2	5	Accompanying spouse, no children	SIE in western country	Host company initiated	No	Advancement
P19 (M)	SE	30	22	9	0	Accompanying spouse, no children	No	Self-initiated	No	Entry
P20 (F)	SE	30	22	9	1	Accompanying spouse, no children	No	Self-initiated	No	Entry
P21 (M)	NE	60	41	19	14	Non-accompanying spouse and children	SIE in Asia	3rd party initiated	No	Advancement
P22 (M)	NE	44	43	1	12	Single	No	3rd party initiated	Yes	Maintenance
P23 (M)	NE	33	32	1	6	Accompanying spouse, no children	No	3rd party initiated	No	Advancement

Notes: Self-initiated: employment, which is found and initiated by the employee her/himself. Host company initiated: employment for which the initial proposal comes from an employer, but the final decision to expatriate remains with the individual. 3rd party initiated: employment, which is initiated by a friend, co-worker or recruitment agency, for example: NE, Northern Europe; SE, Southern Europe; NA, Northern Americas; SA, Southern Americas.

elicit information on the careers, motivation and career self-management behaviour of Western SIEs in local organizations in China.

In addition to the background information requested from the participants, they were also asked how they came to work in China for a local company; to outline their career plans before, during and after the assignment; to outline how they had tried to manage their career development during the assignment and why. The participants were also asked to explain what had influenced their decisions or actions, and to recall the highlights and low points of their assignment in China. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the informants and subsequently transcribed. In order to enhance the validity of the findings, all informants were invited to comment on the transcribed versions of their interview (Riessman, 2008).

The initial assessment consisted of several evaluations of the interview data that were further assessed by qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004). Due to very personal nature of topics, author did not focus only on what was explicitly said, but was rather interested in understanding the meaning of the stories and experiences at the personal level (Geertz, 1973, p. 27). This facilitated the presenting of rich and detailed descriptions of the observed phenomenon as well as taking into account the human actions and perceptions in the particular social context.

The interviews were initially coded by NVivo10 software using the heuristic framework and King's categorizations of career self-management behaviour (2004). As a result of the assessment, career motivation and expected outcomes of the assignment emerged as the dominant thematic areas for further assessment of the self-managed behaviour of SIEs. Despite the benefits of software-assisted categorization, the actual interpretative process proved difficult due to the data being in two languages and was ultimately conducted manually. This careful interpretation process (Riessman, 2008) aimed to identify similar or distinctive career patterns (Saunders et al., 2009) and revealed three SIE groups with similarities in their career experiences. All the findings are illustrated by examples and quotes to provide a comprehensive illustration of the majority of the opinions, or of an extreme case of the relevant topic (Saunders & Rojon, 2014).

Findings

According to the findings, SIEs utilize three distinctive means of career self-management behaviour depending on the career motivations and expected outcomes of the assignment. These are a need to enter the labour market; to remain employable in the face of prospective unemployment, in between jobs or taking an advantage of temporary career opportunity; and having a strong desire for personal and career development. The following section scrutinizes these forms of career self-management behaviour among the Western SIEs in local organizations in China using King's heuristic framework (2004) as its basis for assessment.

Positioning career self-management behaviour: SIEs using a labour market entry approach

Strategic choice of mobility

Expatriation as such could be considered a strategic mobility choice for all SIEs regardless of motivation and expected career outcomes. This strategic element of expatriation does seem to apply particularly to SIEs, who use expatriation as a means to enter a labour

market or career, and are willing to take a professional risk for the sake of advancement by leaving their jobs and lives behind.

P6: That was a very calculated risk decision made between us, in our little family . . .

Particularly for SIEs with a labour market entry approach, the motives for expatriation seem to be connected to poor labour market opportunities at home, and especially for those with little or no professional experience. The reasoning seems to be underpinned by job opportunities offered by the local organizations in China rather than from the financial benefits. Expatriation was perceived as a window of opportunity that could fulfil expectations for professional development and learning.

P9: I guess in the back of my head I thought that if there was a better chance and where the economy is growing the most, it's obviously China. At that time, I was really aware that my professional career was actually quite short. So at that time I was not interested in money at all, but basically what I wanted was just a chance to go on and do design.

SIEs with an entry approach seemed very proactive in their search for employment opportunities. Some simply packed their bags and started looking for employment immediately, while others used the Internet as a tool to aid their job search.

P19: I went to Chinese websites, at that time I knew almost nothing about China, I mean I could not understand or at that time read Chinese, so I used the translator to see if there was an opening.

Strategic investment in human capital and job content innovation

According to the findings, the strategic choice of mobility and the search for employment in the emerging labour markets were perceived as a very successful means of gaining access to the labour markets and acquiring skills valued by the employers. At the same time, Chinese companies were providing opportunities to take on responsibility to develop local processes and offering opportunities for growth even to young Westerners with limited professional experience.

P12: The good thing was that I could go to manufacturing, to develop the projects and I was assigned as the responsible person for the whole series of products, so that was quite big and I would fly to Shanghai to the manufacturing plant to check the samples, check mock-ups and prototypes, discussing with mechanical engineers, technical engineers, so I just absorbed from them, all the knowledge I could, and I still keep doing that.

Despite the opportunities for learning by doing, local companies were not described as providing training or other organizational support to contribute to further competence development and employability. This notion was not only seen in the context of SIEs, but also seemed to apply across the workforce, due presumably to low employee commitment.

P18: Here in China, if you look at the career development and management development in that sense everything is standing a little bit still here. In Europe companies are putting effort into developing the employees for the next step, but here that part is very much missing. So there is no place for development. Here it is also a little bit difficult when you think about investing in people because people here change jobs all the time. You just would not invest too much money in one

person because what happens is that they will change jobs in order to increase the salary and other benefits. It's difficult to have a development plan for your employees like in Europe.

Active network development

Despite their careers in local organizations, Western SIEs seemed to be focused on developing local networks comprising fellow Westerners in China.

P20: I was not used to do a lot of networking before coming to China, but the networking thing in China is quite a big thing. There are many (Western) people handing out many business cards and hoping to get something in return.

In practice, networks were used for to accrue instrumental benefits such as information on job openings and to deliver both contractual and development opportunities in the form of proactive job-hopping.

P9: So if I want to find a job abroad it's going to be quite tough, I guess. Yeah, the competition is much harder if you want to find a job outside China. In China there are many jobs and not that many candidates, it could be easier and faster and that is why I am still here, because I found (current employer) easily and I knew a (locally operating) recruitment agency specialising in talent.

Contextual conditions that affect the positioning form of career self-management behaviour

Despite its advantages for entering a labour market or career, working in China was often seen as both a physical and psychological challenge. Contextual conditions such as pollution and poor infrastructure were often mentioned as the prime reasons for moving on. Other mentioned conditions were the distinctive local organizational culture and perceived lack of control over the content of the work or progress. Some reported changing employers, some moving to another location in China and others had returned home in the middle of an assignment. Despite perceptions of stress and difficulties in adjusting, some SIEs chose to remain in China because of the poor employment opportunities at home.

P12: The reason why I moved from Beijing to Guangzhou was that after four years of designing (a product) I got a little bit blind. And the other reason is that apartments are not really good, it's polluted, so I think it started to affect my mental life, so it was a good reason to move. We talk about different plans, actually, there are different plans in mind, but certainly the plan is not to stay here, in China.

P9: It was probably a 2-year contract and I got a visa for one year . . . But then I left the job. I left because I got sick. I guess it was everything, moving to China, all that. I just could not take it anymore was that just how time consuming this working for this company is . . . and you know there is this vision, in which you are just a workhorse. We came back and took a month to put things in order and I was looking for a job. It was late 2007 or early 2008 and the crisis was just about to begin. So it was difficult to find a job . . . So I ended going back to Shanghai. You know, it's like for the people who have not had job a long time and when you find one, it's just like a relief.

In summary, the positioning behaviour seems to enhance the perceptions of control and coping, as well as views of fit and employability. Although positioning behaviour intended to access professional skills applies particularly to SIEs adopting a labour market

entry approach, this type of behaviour is actually applied by all expatriates who strive to improve their cultural understanding, linguistic capabilities and external local networks. In addition, the career stories of Western expatriates do illustrate the dynamic evolution of the behaviour. Once SIEs with a labour market entry approach have acquired the skills, abilities and networks that enhance their fit and employability, or if they need to revise their career expectations or adjust their personal lives, they tend to focus more on other types of career self-management behaviour instead.

The influencing form of career self-management behaviour: SIEs using a career advancement approach

Influencing career self-management behaviour is the next natural step for SIEs who have acquired professional competencies through applying positioning behaviour. In a similar way, it appears to apply to ambitious SIEs adopting the career advancement approach. Furthermore, the participants to the current research included Westerners who had already met obstacles when trying to get professional recognition or progress their careers. They might have hit a glass ceiling, or found professional opportunities limited by weak labour markets in their home country. For them, employment in China provided a timely opportunity to achieving something new. Unlike the SIEs adopting a labour market entry approach, these Westerners were initially contacted by recruiting agencies or the employers directly because they had competencies of value to the employers.

P16: They contacted me directly from this company . . . I got an e-mail from a woman with very bad English asking if I was interested maybe joining (company) and would it be possible to set up a conference call, to which I agreed. At the time, I was ready to leave (company). I was also getting to the point that I wanted to become a manager, and when my company actually had a role as a senior manager, I could not take that role, there is a kind of glass ceiling. But when they (Chinese company) approached me, I thought that wow this is . . . first of all it's going to be a big challenge because it's in China and second there was a lot of potential growth for my own career . . . wow, this is the place to develop.

These Westerners were usually mobile couples in their 40s without children, or individual (male) SIEs with a family in their home country. Their family situations meant they seldom reported any particular need for boundary management behaviour. They tended instead to apply influencing behaviour to influence key gatekeepers and progress their careers.

Upward influencing was typically seen as the most efficient way of emphasizing the value of the employee to the key gatekeepers of the local organizations. More than positioning behaviour, this approach focuses on satisfying the needs of the host organization, as well as taking into account contextual factors such as local organizational behaviour when seeking the right fit, and to ensure personal employability.

P21: So being here and trying to understand this Chinese aspect has helped me establish myself in the key positions and speaking to key-leaders in these organizations, being part of the strategic meetings etc. and obviously having the support from my superior who is obviously Chinese and supporting my role and function in being in the corporate strategy. That clearly shows that it's appreciated and benefitted. I don't want to be seen as an obnoxious foreigner who thinks that he knows everything better than the Chinese do.

Self-promotion and ingratiation

Ambitious SIEs also seemed very focused on making a difference and ensuring their skills and abilities were recognized. This behaviour not only applied to the internal key gatekeepers, such as co-workers and superiors in the local organizations, but also extended to external networks in social media. This influencing behaviour seemed to target enhancing the perceived fit, reinforcing the sense of adding value to the organization, and reducing insecurity about employability.

P16: Many people already know me globally, you know, I work with Japan, Hong Kong teams, Americans. I have built up for myself that area, so the chances of someone turning around and saying we are not going to renew your contract is probably low, there is more of a chance to say that I am leaving.

Self-promotion and ingratiation were also powerful tools in finding new employment if the opportunities for career advancement were not considered fulfilling. This applied particularly to the use of social media and external networks, which proved to be the most efficient means of finding new career opportunities.

P6: So I understood that (company) was not on the right track anymore, so I opened up my networks again, and they had grown very quickly since I came. I also gave many recommendations for my former colleagues and got some in return. Because it's pretty obvious, you want a recommendation, because you want to be attractive . . . this is how I made myself visible to the world and made myself more interesting.

Contextual conditions and person-related attributes that affect the influencing form of career self-management behaviour

Despite their intentional influencing behaviour, many of the informants reported their frustration and bemoaned a lack of control in their work roles. These perceptions seem to be linked to typical local organizational behaviour and the temporary nature of their employment in the local organizations that undermined group cohesion. The employment was not perceived as meeting initial expectations, which included a need for recognition of personal efforts and achievements and opportunities to advance the career. Expatriates attributed that to the perceived cultural distance, a nationalistic glass ceiling, unethical organizational behaviour or a high-power distance dimension (including hierarchy issues).

P16: So everything that I have achieved as a senior manager, whether I have done a great work, it's for the guys to look better, I don't, I don't get anything back. Nobody tells me I have done a great job, it's not the Chinese culture, they don't do it, so it's about setting my own goals, my own expectations and that is what has made *me* grow.

Similarly, some challenges seemed to be connected to personal attributes, such as traces of Western arrogance. Some Westerners seemed to be more comfortable following traditional Western organizational behaviour norms, and appeared to be passive and expecting their employers to support their personal development. Other contextual conditions, such as long working days, reduced the ability to seek such opportunities actively.

P16: My company does not offer it (language training), it does not offer it even on my own time or if they expect me to work until nine at night, so if my company is not going to put something up and help me learn during my working time, I ain't

going to do that. Why should I have to pay for that myself? It should be in my company's interest to teach me.

It was not maladjustment or local organizational behaviour alone that caused stress or conflict, but also the perceived arbitrary nature of some of the host organization's HRM practices. All expatriate contracts of the informants were either terminated or extended on a rolling annual basis. These decisions were heavily dependent on the actions and strategies of various gatekeeper groups such as direct superiors, but also those of the immigration officers at the national level. These processes, often regarded as arbitrary, affected the predictability of the whole assignment and were also felt to be impossible to influence. The arbitrary nature of Western SIE contracts in local organizations was also noted to be a potential reason for premature termination of contracts.

P13: The length (of the employment) can depend on the manager's opinion. There have been situations that if people are no longer adding value (to the purpose of the company) have they been let go (in midterms).

P17: Working visas are always on a yearly basis and they just renew them every year. The HR department gets that done. (So in a way you are dependent on your employer?) Absolutely!

Despite the challenges, SIEs especially those with long-term plans for their employment in China took a proactive approach to altering their behaviour to better match the contextual conditions and behaviour in the local organizations.

P4: I kind of took an approach of deciding that I should try to enjoy it and I would not allow the people just to fool around. So I took a very aggressive and proactive approach and challenged many people and probably if you took all the books of how you should behave in Asia, it's probably the absolute opposite approach. And in the end it was very powerful because it turned out to be the pretty much how their managers work here. A manager is a rude person here who can get other people to work, so that's a really good manager and so hopefully I added that dimension of competence to it.

Boundary management behaviour: SIEs adopting a maintenance approach

More than half of the SIEs of this dataset considered their assignment to be a timely, but temporary, opportunity to maintain their employability in between jobs, or to deal with the challenging labour market fluctuations at home. For most, the assignment was usually a well-timed, third-party initiated career opportunity (via ex-colleagues or recruitment specialists) in a new culture that interested them.

P1: When (company) was starting to close up the facilities, I was among those to be released. This Chinese company started to headhunt us immediately. I took the compensation package at the same time as I signed the contract for this position. My wife was interested in trying the arrangement and taking a leave of absence for a while so that's how it started.

P2: My kids were already growing up. It's like there was a window for that opportunity, if it arises, both for me and my wife. Well, for me it was not only the work, it was a good opportunity to make some good money, of course and it was an interesting role and it was also about meeting new people and experiencing a totally different culture.

This group of Westerners comprised two mobile, but demographically distinct types of individuals: mature professionals with no parental obligations, and professionals either without children, or with children under school age. There was only one family with school-aged children in the whole dataset, and that family had to shoulder very high schooling costs without any contribution from the employer. Unlike the informants with the labour market entry approach, and similar to those with a career advancement approach, Westerners with a career maintenance approach did not report a need to acquire new professional competencies or skills. Nor did they report any particular interest in enhancing their own fit with the labour market in their host country. That is presumably due to initially viewing their position as temporary and short-term, despite the well-compensated assignments in a host organization with a position of responsibility. For these SIEs, boundary management behaviour proved the most commonly used means of managing their careers during the fixed-term and temporary assignments.

Boundary maintenance

Due to the temporary nature of the assignment for the local organizations in China, many SIEs kept on their accommodation at home where the spouse (and children if there were any) often returned after the first months of a contract or a year, regardless of the total duration of the contract. This pattern seemed to be a reaction to challenging local living conditions or the career-related commitments of the spouse when living apart from the family was not a long-term option.

P1: We did not have any tenants in our apartment, because we knew we'd be back soon. On the other hand, we felt financially safe, after that year in China, so there was no pressure to find a new job. I was also convinced that something would show up sooner or later. I did not really feel like staying in China, alone. I could not imagine flying back and forth, being far away from the children. It would have never worked for us as a family, as the children are still small.

Boundary maintenance also helped some SIEs manage their career through adopting the career advancement approach. For example, one SIE who had returned to China for a second spell had been able to influence key gatekeepers and negotiate flexible working arrangements that provided the flexibility to create and balance satisfactory boundaries for both career and family. The arrangement created the work conditions that tempted the SIE to return to China after the previous engagement in the country with a local organization was terminated owing to issues achieving a satisfactory family–work balance. The satisfactory new arrangements meant the SIE in question could work efficiently and concentrate on the job, while also being able to dedicate more time to the family when at home.

P4: I actually wish to continue with the set up that I have, because it is a very special setup, but if not... well, I'd go back... But before, I was fed up, to put it simply. My contract is now a little special: every second month I am here (in China) and every second month, I am in (home country) and that works completely different for me and us now.

Role transition

Western SIEs also often reported difficulties in balancing work and home domains. Local working culture such as travelling great distances and working very long hours curtailed

their initial intentions to experience the new culture or improve their knowledge of the language. At the same time, it also created pressure to establish a balance between work and the family waiting at home.

P5: Well, if I think about the working culture. It was also so hard, leaving for the office at 7 am and coming back at 8 pm totally exhausted. After dinner, I was just ready to fall asleep and wake up again at 6 am. The time just went so fast, everything was so new, there was simply no energy to think about anything else.

In general, these types of career arrangements seemed stressful for couples and families, and threatened personal relationships, particularly for those with families at home, emphasizing the need for boundary maintenance behaviour.

P7: The situation is really this: if I really still want to keep my wife and family, to remain as a married man, this type of employment just doesn't work out. Without Skype, I would have been a single man a long time ago.

Contextual conditions and person-related attributes that affect boundary management behaviour

Overall, despite the challenges at work, Westerners with a temporary and short-term focus on their assignments seemed to be less affected by the contextual conditions, although balancing the requirements of home and work domains was often challenging for them. Many seemed to adopt a rather *instrumental* attitude to employment, in that it was considered a temporary experience. Following the perceptions of Westerners with a career advancement approach, SIEs who focused on boundary management reported frustration over the lack of organizational support and management practices compared to the Western multinational practices to which they were accustomed. Although they were often offered extended employment opportunities by their local employers, most Westerners were reluctant to extend the contract for more than a year or two, particularly if employment was available at home.

Discussion

This study aimed to answer the questions: *How and why do SIEs use career self-management behaviour?* The findings suggest that the utilization of a specific (but not exclusive) self-management behaviour type (positioning, influencing or boundary management, as in King, 2004) is connected to the motivation behind expatriation and the assignment outcome expectations of SIEs. The findings isolated three different types of career self-management approaches to expatriation on the part of Western SIEs. First, a labour market entry approach focused on entering a labour market or establishing a career. Second, an employability maintenance approach to maintain employability in between jobs or to deal with challenging labour market fluctuations. Third, a career advancement approach. This study adds to King's (2004) conceptual framework by exploring how individuals use career self-management behaviour in cross-cultural career contexts, and explains the significance of understanding the key conditions of the context, such as local culture and organizational behaviour that drives the decisions of the gatekeepers. Findings also illustrate how SIE careers in cross-cultural career context do not necessarily always meet the initial career outcome expectations, and how they need to respond by adapting their career management strategies.

How do SIEs pursue their labour market fit through career self-management behaviour?

This study illustrates how the chosen approach to using career self-management behaviour is dependent on motivation and outcome expectations. However, the careers of Western SIEs also illustrate how not all career expectations are necessarily met, despite the efforts made to achieve a fit and ensure their personal employability. In addition to the contextual conditions, person-related attributes, and the actions of gatekeepers might relate to how SIEs apply career self-management behaviour. In particular, the challenges associated with cross-cultural career contexts require the accommodation of learned behaviour models (see Piaget, 1952 for accommodation) but also illustrate the difficulty of altering behaviour in order to achieve expected career outcomes. This notion seems to apply particularly to individuals with long-term habits of applying traditional Western corporate career self-management behaviour suited to the Western management and organizational paradigm (see Burrell & Morgan, 1979 for organizational paradigms; Briscoe et al., 2006 for a traditional career approach). Briscoe et al. (2006) suggest such individuals seem relatively passive and to look for support from their employers (see King, 2004, for learned helplessness). The findings also revealed how individuals unhindered by learned Western behaviour models seemed more capable of managing their careers and assignments in culturally distant environments (Doherty et al., 2011).

The findings also underline the *dynamic nature of career self-management behaviour* approaches arising from revised career expectations or contextual conditions (Doherty, 2013). For example, individuals with a labour market entry approach first adopted positioning behaviour to enhance their fit and employability focusing primarily on gaining skills, and work experience and building networks. Later their focus shifted towards influencing behaviour prompted by revised career expectations. There are, however, alternative forms of self-management behaviour, and they seem to be particularly favoured by Western SIEs who view working abroad as a temporary assignment between jobs at home. Their focus seemed to be on dealing with challenging work conditions and the expectations of their families by adopting boundary management behaviour.

Why do SIEs pursue labour market fit through career management behaviour?

The findings of this study support the suggestions of Crites (1969) and Berntson, Naswall, Sverke, Berntson, and Näswall (2010) that the reasons for applying career self-management behaviour are connected to the level of control expatriates seek over their careers in a particular context. Similarly, the findings also illustrate how contextual conditions, such as a distinctive organizational culture (Lassere & Ching, 1997) and local organizations not providing support for their (temporary) employees (Varma et al., 2011), may cause frustration and make it difficult to realize the expected career outcomes. These perceptions are often enhanced by individual attributes, such as lack of cultural understanding and language (Peltokorpi & Clausen, 2011; Selmer, 2006). These challenges underline the importance to the success of expatriates of career self-management behaviour and an ability to alter the style of career self-management behaviour adopted to match the prevalent behavioural norms of the host country. This remark applies especially to those who are considered temporary employees in the host country (Cerdin, 2008) and, particularly in the case of China, to be outsiders (Varma et al., 2011).

The findings also explain how SIEs with a long-term interest in expatriation seem to be proactive in seeking ways to achieve a fit and ensure their employability (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). The findings illustrate however how, contrary to expectations

(e.g. Doherty et al., 2011; Inkson et al., 1997; Suutari & Brewster, 2000), not all SIEs are particularly self-managed, or have a perceived need to achieve a labour market fit. Moreover, they indicate that particularly those SIEs with a short-term focus seem to adopt a more instrumental approach to their employment, perceiving short-term employment even in frustrating conditions as made tolerable by generous compensation.

This study recognizes the significance of gatekeepers (see King, 2004), particularly in a country like China where both entry and residence regulations are quite stringent (Pieke, 2012). Findings highlight similarly the significance to establish and maintain external networks through means such as social media. In addition to dealing with the natural gatekeepers – family and employer representatives – the careers of Western SIEs are also heavily influenced by other influential local stakeholder groups. These groups include talent and recruitment agencies, or local officials, but more significantly by other external stakeholder groups connected via the Internet that require both boundary management and influencing behaviour.

Third-party initiated expatriates

This study also revealed an emerging trend of individuals from a variety of backgrounds (cf. Doherty, 2013; Inkson et al., 1997), being attracted by the career opportunities of self-initiated expatriation. Surprisingly, and contrary to the prevalent characteristics ascribed to SIEs in the literature (Andresen et al., 2014), many assignments were third-party initiated rather than self-initiated. One could, of course, ask whether those expatriates should be regarded as SIEs at all. Comparing these third-party-initiated expatriates to OEs and SIEs (Andresen et al., 2014; Suutari & Brewster, 2000) reveals the third-party-initiated type share some of the characteristic features of both types. However, Westerners directing their own search for employment in local organizations in China can find it very challenging. For example, the language barrier can make just finding local human resource managers and approaching them very difficult. Firms also typically use local recruitment agencies and specialists that do not advertise internationally or in English. In addition, the role of the employer in obtaining a work permit and visa is significant (Makkonen, 2013). These local features do provide a justification for considering third-party initiated expatriates as SIEs because the final decision to expatriate remains with the individual (Harrison, Shaffer, & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004) and stems from personal motivation and volition (Al Ariss, 2010). Furthermore, the decision to expatriate is similarly based on subjective career outcome expectations, rather than the expectations of an employer (Peltokorpi, 2008; Al Ariss, 2010) as with the existing definitions of SIEs.

The current study contributes to our understanding of the emerging and under-studied phenomenon of Western SIEs in local organizations in developing economies (China) (cf. Briscoe et al., 2009; Inkson et al., 1997) that are increasing in number (Arp, 2013). Surprisingly, the participants included only two women, which runs counter to the number of female contributors to many SIE studies (e.g. Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Tharenou, 2010). The proportion of female respondents is however in line with some other research (Thorn, 2009), and reflects the proportion of Western expatriate women in China (Brookfield, 2013; Simon & Cao, 2009). It might also be a result of the rather masculine organizational culture of local organizations in China (Hofstede, 1984; Leung, 2012) or of other challenges posed by the Chinese context from the feminine perspective (Muir et al., 2014). This study thus adds to the existing theory about SIEs by illustrating emerging means of realizing international careers in cross-cultural career contexts. The findings also contribute to understanding the career self-management behaviour of SIEs and its dynamic

nature by empirically applying King's framework (2004). This study illustrates that SIEs cannot always influence the development of their careers and how they are affected by the social structures of the host country or the hurdles created by various gatekeepers. Moreover, the current study underlines the significance of external networks and social media to the careers of SIEs.

Practical implications, limitations and suggestions for further research

This study illustrates how contemporary careers are becoming increasingly unpredictable and how career self-management behaviour may be the only means of influencing the process of achieving a fit with a targeted labour market. Particularly individuals with little access to organizational support – SIEs and temporary employees – have a greater need to apply career self-management behaviour and to proactively search for career opportunities. They also need to manage their skills portfolio, enhance their employability by pursuing a fit within the career context and influence all the gatekeepers who influence their career success, particularly in culturally distant career contexts. The findings emphasize the contextual significance of the suitability and effectiveness of an applied self-management behaviour approach. The findings moreover contribute significantly to our understanding of career self-management by illustrating how there are no universally applicable best practices, but that behaviour has to be adapted to fit the social structures and local behaviour models of the host country. The results of this study support the suggestions of Forrier, Sels, and Stynen (2009) that mere willingness or a general protean attitude alone do not make boundaryless careers a reality, but that strategic mobility decisions and career outcomes are often subject to the influence of multiple gatekeepers.

The findings of this study add to our understanding of the emerging methods of finding international work and establishing careers. They also illustrate that despite our current understanding of the characteristics of SIEs and OEs, there remains a question mark over whether third-party initiated expatriates are actually SIEs, OEs or a separate classification. This provides fruitful grounds for further exploration of this topic.

Furthermore, this study illustrates those practical hurdles that prevent China, and potentially other emerging economies, from recruiting Western talent for knowledge transfer purposes, and for succession planning in local organizations. National and local recruitment practices currently favour temporary, fixed-term contracts that are subject to the whims of local managers. Fostering HRM practices would enhance mutual commitment and could assist in enlarging the Western talent pool so that the Chinese market could accommodate more risk-averse and less mobile individuals. People are now more likely to share their employment experiences on international social media networks, and candidates can therefore gather information on employers before accepting positions, particularly in culturally complex environments. Companies that gain a negative reputation as an unreliable employer among skilled Western talent may find it difficult to recruit Westerners in future.

This study provides insights into a neglected research area covering the subjective career experiences of individual SIEs in culturally distant labour markets. Like any individual experience or opinion, these offer insights into specific contexts and cannot be generalized to others, although the background phenomena may be similar. Likewise, the findings cannot be generalized as being appropriate to all SIEs in all contexts. The most limiting factors, however, are the sample size and the absence of women. This outcome might also reflect the outcome of snowballing as a sampling method, which does enhance the uniformity of the cohort interviewed. Since the finding runs counter to the typical

gender composition of SIEs in Western career contexts (Tharenou, 2010), it is a limitation that offers an opportunity for further studies on the role of gender in new types of cross-cultural career contexts in local organizations.

Although this study does not provide a comprehensive illustration of King's framework, it does apply it to the international career context, particularly among SIEs. However, more contextual and longitudinal research should be welcomed. King's framework is also focused on certain frustrating conditions as sources of self-management behaviour. Conditions that result in self-management behaviour may also be positive as illustrated in this study (the ability to acquire professional skills and abilities, employment, establish a fit and employability), and that fact should be taken into consideration in the development of any framework.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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