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**Journey to the International Arena: A Study of the Experiences of
Chinese Expatriates in Two Chinese High Technology
Telecommunication MNCs**

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in Chinese expatriation management, which cannot be assumed to be the same as that for 'western' counterparts in MNCs in developed economies (DMNCs). As Chinese MNCs expand and take a prominent position in the global economy, still relatively little is known about how they manage their employees globally and how those employees respond, beyond the reputation of Chinese expatriates for hard work, hardship tolerance and compliance.

To address this gap, scholars have called for more micro-studies of actual expatriate experience. Accordingly, this long-term, qualitative case study adopts a social relations theoretical framework to investigate detailed accounts of the individual experiences of a group of expatriates employed in two leading Chinese high technology telecommunication MNCs. A cohort of twenty-seven research participants were recruited, without recourse to their employing firm.

In data collected over a period of two years or more, this study confirms that roles of Chinese expatriates in the high technology sector are different from norms in DMNCs. There is a concentration on operational roles, with limited interaction with host country contexts. The segmentation of operational, dual and senior managerial functions generally occur during (and as part of) the flow of firm-bounded expatriation and repatriation. Expatriates experience intensity of work, years of separation on overseas assignments and sometimes harsh and unfamiliar host-country environments. Their response is influenced by multiple intersecting factors and bounded by their negative perceptions of their labour mobility power.

The dissertation's empirical contribution lies in presenting independent worker testimony. It also offers two theoretical contributions. First, it suggests that the nature and role of the expatriate needs to be re-evaluated to address their changing roles and functions as part of a global workforce. Second, it advocates a more grounded and holistic evaluation of the roots of stereotypical 'Chinese compliance' and hardship tolerance.

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List of Abbreviations

ACFTU	ACFTU All-China Federation of Trade Unions
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCM	Cross-culture Management
CET-4	College English Test
CFO	Chief Executive Officer
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
CMEs	Coordinated Market Economies
COO	Chief Operating Officer
CPC ¹	Communist Party of China
DMNCs	Multinational Corporations from Developed Countries
EMNCs	Multinational Corporations from Emerging Countries
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
HCNs	Host Country Nationals
HRM	Human Resource Management
IHRM	International Human Resource Management
IR	Industrial Relation
LCL	Labour Contract Law
LMEs	Liberal Market Economies
MNCs	Multinational Corporations
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisations
OFDI	Outward Foreign Direct Investment
PCNs	Parent Country Nationals
POEs	Privately Owned Enterprises
SASAC	State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council
SOEs	State-owned Enterprises
SSRM	Social Science Research Methods
WHS	Work Hard and Strive
WHSP	Work Hard and Strive Person

¹ CPC is the official abbreviation by the Chinese government. Since different authors in the literature used CPC and CCP simultaneously, no attempts are made to differentiate CPC from CCP in the current thesis.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context for this Research

As the rapid internationalisation of multinational corporations (MNCs) takes place around the world, expatriate management is central to the field of international human resource management (IHRM) (Dowling et al. 2013; Sparrow 2012; Brewster et al. 2008). In the field of IHRM, the literature has traditionally concentrated on three aspects: cross-cultural management (CCM), Human Resource (HR) practices within multinational corporations (MNCs), and comparative HR and industrial relation (IR) mechanisms (Brewster et al. 2016). Overall, the IHRM literature primarily is concerned with understanding how organisations can effectively manage their global workforce, while taking into account the unique cultural, legal, and institutional contexts in which they operate.

In this scholarly context, past research on expatriate management has concentrated on MNCs headquartered in developed economies (DMNCs), and focused on global staffing policies and practices, including recruitment and selection, pre-departure training, career development and knowledge transfer from parent to host countries (Selmer et al. 2015; Hocking et al. 2007). Such research mainly relied on agency theory to explain the use and impact of expatriates for DMNCs (Zheng and Smith 2019) and highlights two aspects of expatriates' relationship with senior management of the DMNC. First, their close relationship as agents of senior management and communicators of the corporate values of the DMNC to its subsidiaries (Edström and Galbraith 1977; Jensen and Meckling 1976). Second, the alignment of expatriates' career goals with the DMNC's career progression framework (for example, Briscoe et al. 2012; Dabic et al. 2013). Briefly summarised, the purpose of sending trusted expatriates to subsidiaries was explained as part of DMNCs' strategy to control overseas units and transfer knowledge through a small number of managerial and technical expatriates (Eisenhardt 1989; Gong 2003; Harzing 2001b; Shen and

Edwards 2004; Tarique et al. 2006). In pursuing these policies, DMNCs pay attention to preparing expatriates for their assignments, including supporting expatriate adaptability, cross-cultural adjustment and performance (Lin et al. 2012; Jiang et al. 2012).

Today, DMNCs face competition from MNCs in emerging economies, who have their own multinational corporations (EMNCs). China leads the way in this respect. Due to the “*Opening up*” and the continuous “*Going out*” policies adopted since the 1980s and the late 1990s, China has engaged in increasing levels of outward foreign direct investment (OFDI). China’s investment in various industries, including primary industries such as petroleum and mining as well as construction and telecommunications, totalled 135 billion US dollars world-wide in 2017 (UNCTAD 2017). According to the Statistical Bulletin of China’s Outward Foreign Direct Investment, the figure for Chinese OFDI reached 153.71 billion US dollars in 2020. The rapid expansion of Chinese MNCs, as an important part of the EMNCs family, has attracted increasing research in the field of International Business (IB), with a focus on entry modes, capabilities, competitive advantage and disadvantage, and investment location patterns in terms of internationalisation (Liu et al. 2016).

Despite the increasing study of the internationalisation of Chinese MNCs, there remains a lack of information about how Chinese MNCs organise their work and manage their employees on a global scale (Zhu and Wei 2014; Smith and Zheng 2016). The aggressive global expansion of Chinese MNCs has led to a significant increase in the number of Chinese workers employed overseas. According to the Annual Report on China International Labour Cooperation (2019-2020), the number of Chinese labour service personnel working abroad has reached a noteworthy figure of 992,000. This increase in the number of Chinese expatriates highlights the importance of studying global staffing in Chinese MNCs to aid the understanding of Chinese HRM in action (Zhu and Wei 2014).

Existing research shows that Chinese MNCs tend to rely heavily on expatriates not only in managerial but also especially in *non-managerial* positions in different sectors (Smith and Zheng 2016; Zhong et al. 2015; Zhu et al. 2014; Cooke 2012; Zheng and Lamond 2009; Tarique and Schuler 2008). The heavy use of a large number of operational expatriates in Chinese MNCs is a significantly difference in policy and practice from DMNCs, who typically send much smaller numbers of senior managers to overseas subsidiaries (Zheng and Smith 2019). The distinctiveness of the Chinese approach to expatriation inspired the present research, highlighting the need for more in-depth research to revisit the mainstream literature on expatriation (Zheng and Smith 2019).

There is a general acknowledgement of the need for more detailed micro-studies of the motivations of Chinese expatriates, to understand how their attitudes to work are influenced by corporation and state and how, as individuals, they respond. As Cooke et al. (2020, p.2) highlight, there is a need for “a *bottom-up* and *practice-oriented* approach to examining HRM in the international context in order to reveal local drivers, policies, *practices* and *outcomes* of HRM practices” [emphasis added].

Accordingly, the objective of this research is to explore individual Chinese expatriates’ experiences of their expatriation in the high technology sector. This particular sector is one of the most Chinese successful industries across the globe and it is closely linked to the Chinese government. The study explores the experiences of individual expatriates in a long-term, qualitative study, that also highlights management strategies in Chinese MNCs. It also investigates the impacts and outcomes of the expatriation system, particularly focusing on the responses and feelings of individual expatriates. Moreover, the study interrogates the “hardship tolerance” and “compliance” characteristics of Chinese workers to gain insights into Chinese HRM practices.

The study focuses on the experiences of Chinese expatriates employed by two leading high technology MNCs – privately owned Company A and state-owned Company B. For the purposes of this research, the definition by McNulty and Brewster (2016, p. 20) will be used to define an expatriate as someone who is “relocated” to “work temporarily” in a country where “they are not a citizen”. Twenty-seven research participants, including expatriates and repatriates, and some other additional managerial interviewees were accessed independently of their employing firms and were interviewed repeatedly over a period of two to three years. The research is designed as a long-term comparative case study.

At the outset, it should be noted that this research is part of a growing body of work as the challenge to investigate the Chinese expatriation experience is being taken up by several researchers. Among this more recent work, Lai's (2016) doctoral thesis on the internationalisation of a Chinese telecommunication MNC stands out as exemplary. His thesis takes a micro-level perspective in understanding the organisational control system of Teleman – a telecommunications MNC. Lai's (2016) single case study company, like the cases in the present study, adopted a distinctly centralised control structure over their subsidiaries. Expatriates played pivotal roles in operational and capital functions, driven by a robust corporate culture and a meticulously designed incentive framework. Many of Lai's findings resonate with my own research, underscoring the prevalence of highly centralised control mechanisms among Chinese high technology telecommunications MNCs for governing both expatriates and overseas subsidiaries. Under similar conditioning of work, the behaviours of expatriates (for example, their apparent compliance) and response to the regime of control in Lai's study and my own are very similar. However, in my research I have supplemented and built on Lai's findings by adopting a long term *comparative* case study as the research design – comparing expatriates' experiences in a privately owned with a state-owned high technology MNC.

The present study is also relevant for reading alongside Lai's later collaboration with Morgan and Morris (2020) where the authors considered the dynamics of identity regulation within a Chinese multinational corporation. Their paper focuses on how senior managers within the organisation strategically leverage distinct national and organisational contexts in China to establish, reinforce, and perpetuate specific employee identities. These identities are influenced by narratives within the broader Chinese context and mirror the Chinese state's rhetoric around achieving industrial prominence in the context of a century of Western-induced humiliation. The state and corporation emphasise the imperative for employees to exert additional effort in response to existential challenges confronting both the company and the nation.

In this context, many claims have been made for the Chinese worker: it is said they are compliant, tolerant of hardship and predisposed towards harmony in working relationships (Cooke 2011; Lee 2017). Such characteristics have variously been explained by aspects of the Chinese identity, national history and cultural factors (for example, Lai et al. 2020), but all these explanations are contested to some degree. Accordingly, in my work the interpretation and analysis of the expatriates' responses to 'identity control' resonate with Lai et al's (2020) work but there are distinctions in my analysis and the conclusions I draw. The present study agrees with Lai et al. (2020) that cultural control has wielded historical significance and that identity is important. However, in this thesis it is not concluded that 'Chineseness' or associated 'identity' are sole determinants of expatriates' behaviour. Rather, it will be argued that the labour control regime, intensified competition within China's domestic labour market, sector-specific norms exert additional and powerful influence on the conduct and response of Chinese workers.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured across nine chapters. Chapter 2 critically reviews existing literature on expatriation, aiming to identify the rationale for the current research. It

first focuses on the broader debate on expatriation in DMNCs in the IHRM field and shows the distinctiveness of Chinese expatriation. It then explains the social relations approach to understanding the roles and pathways of expatriation in Chinese MNCs. It finally concludes by highlighting the research gap and the importance of studying expatriation from a micro-level perspective, in Chinese MNCs.

In order to provide a clear context for the increase in Chinese outward investment and expatriation, Chapter 3 explains the context for the Chinese labour control regime. It presents the political, economic, and societal development of China and highlights features of Chinese HRM, with particular attention paid to the role of the state and the ideology of 'harmony' and 'harmonious society' that is closely associated with HRM. This chapter also considers the relationship between the high technology sector and the Chinese government, in order to justify the choice of this sector as a focus for researching expatriation. The third part of this chapter focuses on the characteristics of Chinese workers and discusses stereotypical reputations for harmony, conflict and resistance.

Chapter 4 outlines the research gap, broad theoretical framework and research questions. It justifies the research philosophy, methodology and methods that have been used to address the research questions. Specifically, it describes the interpretive philosophical underpinnings of the research. The long-term case study research design is explained, along with a full explanation of the importance of guanxi to negotiating access and data analysis.

Chapter 5, 6 and 7 present key empirical findings from this study. Chapter 5 presents detailed profiles of the respondents, including expatriates, repatriates and some additional interviewees. It then provides a detailed account of the recruitment and selection process of Company A and B. One key finding was that both selected firms largely relied on a firm-bounded recruitment approach, and for new entrants they

each apply standardised selection criteria to all candidates, whether or not they were to be expatriated.

Chapter 6 describes the corporate values of Companies A and B and shows how they align with national objectives and the ways in which these values are instilled in employees and expatriates working for the companies. Findings highlight the significant impact corporations have on the working practices of expatriates, particularly in Company A. In the context of strong corporate culture, the training for expatriation training assimilation into the customs and traditions of their host nations is virtually absent. Both companies barely provide cross-cultural training. This absence highlights the nature and purpose of the operational and capital functions undertaken by the expatriate in their respective subsidiaries.

Chapter 7 provides a comprehensive account of the respondents' work and non-work experiences during their expatriation. It describes the incentives for expatriates, including financial and career development opportunities. It then focuses on the challenges and hardships that expatriates face while on expatriation. Findings reveal that these expatriates encountered both physical and mental difficulties during expatriation. It concludes that expatriates' understanding of the limitations on their own mobility power may be a significant influence on the ways in which they respond.

Chapter 8 discusses the issues raised by the findings. It is structured to reflect the two sets of social relations, namely pathways of expatriation and the functions of expatriates. It first discusses the pathways of expatriation in each of the employing MNCs, drawing together the findings around recruitment and selection, and the impacts of expatriation for individuals. It then moves on to discuss roles of expatriates and the implications for how the role of the expatriate may be conceptualised. It also considers how far the individual experiences of research participants reveal their individual agency over matters and choices in their own

lives. The third part of the chapter considers whether and to what extent the research has the potential to provide broader insights into 'Chinese HRM'.

Chapter 9 serves as the concluding chapter of this thesis, providing a brief summary of the study and its results. It then moves to highlight the theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions of the study, as well as its implications and final reflections. It concludes that the need for a re-evaluation of the understanding of the expatriate's role as part of a global workforce is supported by the findings. In this context, it also suggests that while the issue of 'Chinese identity' is relevant, it is not a sufficient explanation of the Chinese reputation for hard work, compliance and hardship tolerance. As a small scale study, any attempt at wider generalisation must be undertaken with care, but these results are a valid contribution to the debate over the role and status of the expatriate and provide a foundation for further research in the nature and role of expatriates and expatriation in the global economy.

Chapter 2: Expatriation and the Chinese Expatriate

2.1 Introduction

The management of a globally dispersed workforce and the effective deployment of expatriates in subsidiaries has been identified as a vital strategic contribution to the success of MNCs (Tung 1984; Brewster et al. 2008; Jiang et al. 2012; Sparrow 2012). The study of expatriate management sits mainly within the IHRM literature, and more broadly in international business field. The field of international development is also helpful in illuminating the role of expatriates in the process of capital expansion (for example, Gonzalez-Vincente 2019; Selwyn 2017). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a critical review of the literature which illuminates the roles of expatriates more generally, with a particular focus on Chinese expatriation. It will also highlight the research gap and rationale for this doctoral research.

The recent work of Zheng and Smith (2019) has engaged with roles performed by expatriate roles in significant detail, specifically in Chinese MNCs. The authors developed a 'tiered expatriation' framework, influenced by the work of Carchedi (1977), to explore the social relations of expatriation and the segmentation of roles performed by expatriates within subsidiaries. This allows for distinctions to be made between the expatriate's role as communicator of corporate values and standards, their *capital* function, as opposed to their technical and operational roles, their *labour* function. This doctoral dissertation is based on a micro-study of the experiences of individual Chinese expatriates and its scope is narrower than Zheng and Smith's (2019) research focus. However, the distinction between the capital and labour function and the segmentation of expatriate roles and functions is a very helpful framework for investigating the expatriate experience, especially since the majority of the Chinese expatriates who participated in this research occupy operational or *dual* operational and managerial roles.

The chapter is composed of three main sections. The first section outlines the trends in long-standing IHRM literature around expatriation, including home versus host country influence, divergence and convergence in HR practices, and the expatriate's role. This provides a context for the second main section of the chapter, which discusses the social relations and managerial and operational dimensions of expatriate roles in greater detail and concentrates more specifically on expatriation in Chinese MNCs. The third section of the chapter considers the relevance of pathways towards (and out of) expatriation for our understanding of the role of the Chinese expatriate. It concludes by identifying the research gap which is addressed by this research, highlighting the calls that have been made for more micro-level studies of Chinese expatriation.

2.2 IHRM and the Expatriate

The field of IHRM, as described by Rees and Edwards (2017, p.3),

focuses on the way MNCs attempt to influence the way people work in their operations' borders ... [while] ... globalisation presents new and significant challenges for managing and regulating work on an international basis.

In general, the IHRM literature focuses on human resource issues and practices in MNCs, including CCM, comparative HR and IR mechanisms (Brewster et al. 2016). The majority of earlier studies of these issues, and also expatriation, were mainly focused on DMNCs (Delbridge et al. 2011; Mathews 2006), particularly those in the US and Japan (Zheng and Smith 2019). By the early 2000s, over 96 per cent of empirical studies of IHRM published in international journals had been conducted in developed economies (Batt and Banerjee 2009). This trend continued into the next decade. As Zhong et al. (2015) showed, the academic journal articles written in English and focusing on China's record on expatriate management from 2001 to 2013, largely concentrated on the experiences of foreign nationals working as

expatriates *inside* China rather than paying attention to Chinese expatriates themselves (for breakdown, see Appendix 1).

In the IHRM literature, expatriates have generally been defined as a small number of relatively expensive employees sitting within a trusted nexus with senior management (Edström and Galbraith 1977) and working in key managerial and technical positions in overseas subsidiaries (Brewster et al. 2014). Their expatriate careers are managed in line with the DMNC's objectives and established career progression framework (Briscoe et al. 2012; Dabic et al. 2013). In this respect they fulfil what Zheng and Smith (2019) have described as the *capital* function of expatriates. This means that they act as channels for the parent MNC's communication and control strategies, targeted at the growth and expansion of the business. Generally, in the IHRM expatriation literature to date, the concentration on the capital role of expatriates has meant that the analysis of the role and function of expatriates employed on *operational* tasks has been largely missed (Zheng and Smith 2019).

In this context, the analysis of the capital role of expatriates has centred on 'home-versus host-country' effects and the diffusion (or reverse diffusion) of parent company values and practices to subsidiaries through expatriates (for example, Edwards et al. 2010; Edwards and Rees 2017; Harzing 1999, 2001b; Pudelko and Harzing 2007; Bird et al. 1998). An associated question for IHRM scholars has been whether there can be universal application – or convergence – around a set of core human resource 'best practices' in MNCs (Dabic et al. 2013; De Cieri and Dowling 2012; Pudelko and Harzing 2007). In subsidiaries located in different geographical, cultural and institutional contexts there are varied pressures. However, some scholars argued that the influence of globalisation would present all MNCs (no matter what their home country) with the same competitive imperatives, driving them to adopt similar HR practices (Mueller 1994). As the early dominant MNCs were owned by the US, the assumption was that – over time – economic development

would lead to “a standardisation around American management practices, commonly perceived as representing best practices” (Pudelko and Harzing 2007, pp. 538-540). This did not prove to be the case, as despite similar competitive contexts, local differences have persisted in MNCs subsidiaries (Edwards et al. 2010; Edwards and Rees 2017).

An understanding of local variation and the parent firm’s need to “seek advantages from both home and host country locations” (Rees and Edwards 2017, p. 13) has therefore been of central importance to the study of IHRM (Paik et al. 2011). Related to the home-host country analysis, institutional theorists have highlighted the influence of national institutions on MNCs’ practices (Pattenden 2020; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Comparative institutionalists believe that the historical evolution of societal institutions shapes the distinct features of developing economic activities, and therefore management practices will reflect the national institutions in which they are set (Lai 2016). This allows for institutions in host-countries exerting influence on practices in that location and perhaps having an impact on the parent company as well. However, as MNCs are powerful political actors in their own right, they also have the power to influence regulation and markets in the locations where they invest (Rees and Edwards 2017). In the specific case of Chinese MNCs, they are just as capable as DMNCs have been in commodifying labour and influencing markets beyond their domestic borders (Westra 2018; Zheng and Smith 2019). Moreover, within the firm, organisational institutionalists argue that subsidiaries need to maintain legitimacy with the MNC headquarters (HQ) and the host country at the same time (Kostova and Roth 2002). Therefore, subsidiaries encounter a twin pressure to adopt the MNC home country practices while complying with local institutions (Westney 1993; see also Almond 2017). This sets up tensions that may not be easy to resolve, particularly when there are also cultural values and attitudes prevalent in MNC home countries that conflict with host country norms, and vice versa (see Hofstede 2001).

The country-of-origin approach places the expatriate in the role of communicator of corporate standards and values – the capital role. However, it also focuses on the expatriate's capacity to adapt and integrate with local culture in order to communicate well and settle into the working environment of the subsidiary.

'Expatriate failure' has been expensive for DMNCs and is frequently associated with poor adaptation to new working environments, not only by the expatriate but also by their families (Moore 2017; Wood 2006; Black and Gregersen 1999). This can undermine the integrity and attractiveness of expatriation more generally and inhibit future expatriates from coming forward to carry out international assignments (Pinnington 2011). For this reason, DMNC expatriates are usually required to have training and pre-departure orientation to understand the nature of their international assignments and to prepare them for life in the host country (Evans et al. 2002; Harries and Brewster 1999). Although pre-departure training may vary in content and style, the goal is to help the expatriate to adjust to the subsidiary host-country positively and function effectively (Smale 2008). Issues of cross-cultural adjustment have therefore been stressed in training of expatriates in DMNCs (Chen et al. 2010; Dowling et al. 2008). This body of IHRM literature has been very influential in determining how best to manage and theorise global staffing, but today, DMNCs are not the only international giants.

China and other emerging economies are growing their own multinational firms, but they do not necessarily follow the same patterns of labour usage or preparation for expatriation as DMNCs (Cooke 2012; Rui et al. 2017; Zheng and Smith 2019). Earlier enquiries into Chinese MNCs have tended to place most emphasis on their motives for outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) rather than the experience and role of the expatriate. The focus has been on their capabilities, competitive advantage and disadvantage, and the investment location patterns and entry strategies in terms of internationalisation (Liu et al. 2016). Calls have been made for more small scale studies of the expatriate experience (Cooke 2012; Smith and

Zheng 2016; Zhu and Wei 2014). Arguably, one major reason for the gap in knowledge is the difficulty of gaining access to individual expatriates without involving their employing firm, which is important when seeking independent, first-hand accounts of expatriate experiences and insights into their working lives.

Difficulties in gaining access have to be put in the context of the role of the Chinese state as well as the corporation. Major differences in Chinese institutional and cultural contexts are discerned when compared with other economies (see, for example, Cooke 2012, 2014; Rui et al. 2017; Shen and Edwards 2004). Perhaps the most important consideration is that in China, “state and markets do not stand as separate entities, but the boundaries between them are irremediably blurred” (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019, p. 494). This provides a distinctive context for Chinese MNCs as they internationalise (Gaffney et al. 2014; Luo and Tung 2007). The detail of this context is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. However, alongside the rapid expansion of China’s MNCs in recent decades, it is apparent that patterns of Chinese expatriation are different (for example, Lee 2017; Smith and Zheng 2016; Zheng and Smith 2019).

One key distinction in Chinese MNCs is the heavy use of Chinese nationals in overseas subsidiaries. Large numbers of Chinese expatriates are assigned to operational and technical positions (labour functions) as well as more senior managerial (capital functions) roles (Cooke 2012, 2014; Gonzalez-Vicente 2019; Lee 2009, 2014; Rui et al. 2017; Zheng and Smith 2019). This contrasts with the more limited deployment of expatriates on operational tasks in DMNCs. It has challenged ways of thinking about what an expatriate ‘is’ and what they ‘do’ (Cooke 2012; Rui et al. 2017; Zheng and Smith 2019). Zheng and Smith (2019, p.489) argue that analysis reliant on ‘home and host country effects’ has failed to explain the “segmentation among expatriates”, that is apparent in the different roles they play in Chinese MNCs.

Rather, to analyse the distinctiveness of expatriation in Chinese MNCs, Zheng and Smith (2019) advocate a social relations approach. They identify two sets of social relations: first, the social functions of expatriates (which include the global function of capital and the collective function of labour) and second, the pathway of expatriation including intra- and interfirm transfers. This is a new and helpful theoretical framework for the analysis of expatriation in Chinese MNCs. Key issues are explored in section two of this chapter.

2.3 Social Functions of the Expatriate – Capital and Labour (Operational) Roles

The use of a small number of expensive managerial expatriates in a capital role as agents of control between DMNCs and their subsidiaries has been heavily studied (Barlett and Ghoshal 1989; Ferner et al. 2013; Harzing 1999; Pudelko and Harzing 2007; Brenner and Ambos 2013). Child (1984, p. 136) defined organisational control as,

a process whereby management and other groups are able to initiate and regulate the conduct of activities so that their results accord with the goals and expectations by those groups.

Similarly, Cardinal (2010, p. 57) defined it as

any process whereby managers direct attention, motivate, and encourage organizational members to act in ways desirable to achieving the organization's objectives.

The work of Harzing (1999), Table 2.1 identifies various approaches to control mechanisms between DMNCs and their subsidiaries.

Table 2.1 Classification of control mechanism on two dimensions (Harzing 1999, p.21)

	Personal/cultural	Impersonal/Bureaucratic/Technocratic
Direct/Explicit	Personal centralised control	Bureaucratic formalised control
Indirect/Implicit	Control by socialisation and network	Output control

Direct, centralised, explicit control is in line with a top-down managerial strategy. The parent firm's authority over decision making is either communicated by expatriate managers, (personal centralised control) or through bureaucratic formalised mechanisms, based on written rules and regulations (Blau and Scott 1963; Mintzberg 1979). Additionally, indirect control may be exercised through expatriate managers who seek to influence employee attitudes and behaviours through socialisation, communication and networking. Control by socialisation focuses on cultural control, with the expatriate acting as a vehicle for communicating and cultivating sets of values about work which guide behaviours (see Harzing 2001b). Finally, control can also be exercised through output control. This refers to control that is exercised by the parent firm through targets for quality and volume of output rather than direct supervision of tasks. It may also involve cultural control to influence worker values, attitudes and behaviours.

Getting the right mix of home, host and third-country nationals to exert such control has been central to DMNC strategy in international business (Scullion and Collings 2006, p.3; Collings et al. 2009). In understanding past trends in control strategies and global staffing, the work of Perlmutter (1969) is helpful. His studies of early DMNCs showed how managers' attitudes towards host countries influenced global staffing of their subsidiaries. Perlmutter's (1969) analysis categorised the attitudes of managers under three main headings: ethnocentric, polycentric and geocentric, and

linked these to managerial practices, behaviours and decision making. An ethnocentric attitude assumes that home country (HQ) nationals are superior in capabilities to host country (subsidiary) nationals. Polycentric attitudes are more associated with acknowledging some value in host country nationals' capabilities, with control over certain functions being shared between staff employed at HQs and subsidiaries. A geocentric attitude is associated with a more international approach to the management of subsidiaries, with shared staffing according to ability, not nationality, and the adoption of global best practices. Extending this early research, Figure 2.1 shows how the deployment of three main types of "international assignees" (Scullion 1994) can be related to the different assumptions about parent country nationals (PCNs), host country nationals (HCNs), and third-country nationals (TCNs) that are reflected in Perlmutter's work.

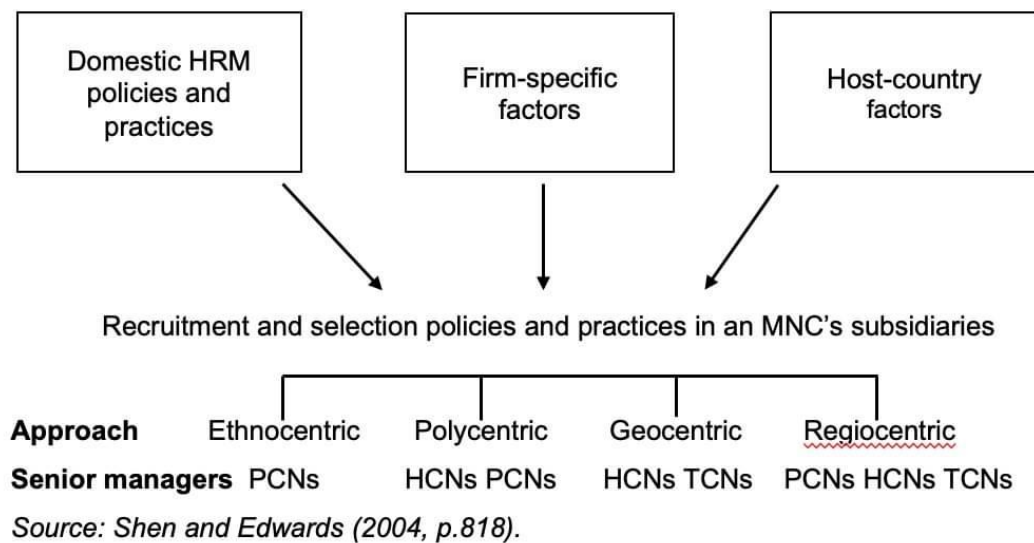


Figure 2.1 Representation of international recruitment and selection approach – typical of DMNCs. Source: Shen and Edwards (2004, p.818).

Hence, in DMNCs, expatriates have been used in different ways as an essential part of the control of subsidiaries (Fang et al. 2010). In line with what Zheng and Smith (2019) refer to as the expatriate's *capital* role, DMNCs have used expatriates as a particular governance mechanism (Gong 2003), ensuring that staff in subsidiaries

comply with the parent firm's organisational values and operational priorities (Belderbos and Heijltjes 2005).

In addition to the dominance of Western MNCs, it is worth noting that Japanese MNCs also achieved significant success in the 1980s. Similarly to Chinese MNCs today, Japanese MNCs adopted a highly centralised management and control approach, relying heavily on expatriates to oversee their overseas subsidiaries (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989; Ferner 1997). For instance, Morgan et al. (2003) demonstrated that Japanese banks assigned numerous Japanese managers to their British subsidiaries, allowing them to participate in decision-making processes and ultimately exercise control over the subsidiaries based on headquarters' requirements. Furthermore, Bird et al. (1998, p.163) highlighted that certain Japanese MNCs pursued a strategy of wholesale transplantation, wherein they transferred the entire HRM system from the parent company to the affiliate. Similarly, Whitley et al. (2003), in their study of Japanese car manufacturers, found that Japanese expatriate managers and technical staff primarily held coordinating roles once the UK plants had successfully established themselves. These studies on Japanese MNCs emphasise the role of Japanese expatriates as coordinators and controllers in high numbers (Yoshihara 2004; Whitley et al. 2003), highlighting their significant involvement in managing international operations. The heavy use of Japanese expatriates suggests a more centralised control approach, where decisions and operations are managed from the headquarters. Studying this approach in Japanese MNCs can help researchers understand how centralised control impacts subsidiary autonomy, decision-making, and overall performance. This comparison can be valuable for understanding how Chinese MNCs balance centralised control with subsidiary empowerment. However, similar to Western MNCs, it is noted that Japanese MNCs mainly rely on senior managers and key technicians in their overseas subsidiaries, while Chinese MNCs rely on more operational workers (this point will be expanded later).

As MNCs have evolved in emerging economies, there are questions over about how far this sort of knowledge, that originated in studies of DMNCs, can be universally applied. To date, studies of relations between MNCs and subsidiaries and the use of expatriates have been top down, focusing mainly on organisational strategies of control, with limited insight into the social relations of the expatriate experience (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019; Smith and Zheng 2016; Zheng and Smith 2019). This approach has meant that,

our current understanding of expatriation in terms of why and how MNCs use expatriates is framed through a narrative of expatriates playing a global *capital* function as a key aspect of the capital role of expatriates (Zheng and Smith 2019, p. 499, emphasis added).

There is therefore a need for more worker-centred enquiry. Moreover, this research needs to focus on MNCs from emerging economies and China in particular, instead of predominantly paying attention to DMNCs (Zhong et al. 2015; see also Liu and Smith 2016; Zheng and Smith 2019). The following section of the chapter considers the significance of pathways to expatriation, with a particular focus on practices in Chinese MNCs.

2.4 Pathways of Expatriation and Explanations of Labour Usage in Chinese MNCs

Recruitment is defined as the process of seeking and obtaining potential candidates of sufficient quality and numbers, while selection is the process of evaluating and choosing successful candidates for a particular job (Dowling et al. 1994). These are separate but related activities in HRM. Generally, recruitment of expatriates may occur within a firm's internal labour market or externally from the wider labour market (Scullion 1994; Zheng and Smith 2019). The number of expatriates can vary based on the size and sector of the firm, the history of the firm's internationalisation, as well as the cultural distance between home (HQ) and host countries for subsidiaries (McNulty and Tharenou 2004). There is also variation in deployment of expatriates according to the MNC's home country (Edwards and Rees 2017).

A common theme (already noted) is the tendency for DMNCs to dispatch a relatively small number of expatriates to executive and some high technical positions (Harzing 2001a; Zheng and Smith 2019). It has been argued that this is mainly because of the high administrative costs of employing them and ensuring they are well trained; DMNCs aim to create international teams who combine knowledge of host country market conditions with local and organisational competence (Moore 2017; Pucik 1984). Sectoral influences, home country policies and host country factors, such as the stage of internationalisation, international strategy, and political, economic and socio-cultural environment are all factors that affect expatriate recruitment (Shen and Edwards 2006). Dowling et al. (2013) identify six critical factors in expatriate selection criteria based on research in DMNCs. These include firms' preference, technical/professional skills, family requirements, host country environment preferences, language and cross-cultural adaptability.

For Chinese MNCs, however, a standard or unique Chinese model of doing things does not seem to exist (Smith and Zheng 2016). There is a general "management

focus on tight cost consciousness, competition, and authoritarian control” but the variation in the sectoral, regional and local context that exists *within* China means that there is no single Chinese model of management across all sectors and regions (Smith and Zheng 2016, p. 374). Today, Chinese MNCs are operating in more divided worldwide labour markets, inside different areas, and under more diverse work conditions than ever before (Zheng and Smith 2019). The scale of expansion and rapid growth of multinational corporations from emerging countries (EMNCs) in the last decade, has changed the global landscape. Specifically, China has caught the attention of the research community due to the rapid increase in its outward FDI, which reached 110.6 billion dollars in 2019 (CNBC 2020). Increasingly, researchers have used Chinese MNCs as an example in exploring the development of EMNCs (for example, Zhu 2018; Zhong et al. 2015; Cooke 2011, 2005). However, although Chinese MNCs are part of the EMNCs family, China’s distinctiveness means that the expatriation practices of Chinese MNCs may differ even between firms in different sectors and may not be replicated in other emerging economies. Chinese MNCs therefore demand specific attention.

It can be difficult to disentangle the structure and governance of firms from the wider political and economic context in China. In Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), HR practices are highly influenced by the Communist Party and its relevant organs. In the case of privately-owned enterprises (POEs) the Chinese state may not *directly* control them in the same way as it controls SOEs, but it may still strongly influence their strategies and activities, especially in sensitive industries like high technology communications.

In comparison with the overall motivations for Chinese internationalisation, relatively less research has focused on the labour management in Chinese MNCs (Smith and Zheng 2016; Zhu and Wei 2014). Despite variations, there are some common practices. Chinese MNCs seek to recruit employees and expatriates who will accept hierarchical control and comply with managers’ personal authority and top-down

instruction (Dosenbach et al. 2008; Ferner et al. 2004). They are deployed across the full range of functions and roles in subsidiaries, where they are expected to comply with the organisational hierarchy and rely heavily on orders and commands from superiors (Wang et al. 2005; Lai 2016). This implies a low degree of participation in decision making and is the context for recruitment, selection and deployment of expatriates in Chinese MNCs. The pathway into expatriation is important for perpetuating norms of behaviour. Management style is typically authoritarian, emphasising the importance of the organisation's interests and encouraging employees to obey regulations and commit to hard working ideals (see Sun 2009).

Chinese MNCs have traditionally depended heavily on internal recruitment and pre-selection of expatriates, where the *guanxi*² between expatriates and superiors played a central role in selection and there was rather less attention on other criteria like professional skills, personal characteristics, and capabilities (Shen and Edwards 2004). While this is changing and Zheng and Smith (2019, p.493) identify that increasingly Chinese MNCs are using more diverse recruitment strategies, in certain sectors like high technology there is still reliance on firm-assigned expatriates and firm-bounded recruitment (for example, Tech.Co., Zheng and Smith 2019). In this context, one specific, notable common approach is the extensive numbers of non-managerial Chinese workers that are sent to subsidiaries to fulfil operational roles (Lee 2014; Cooke 2014; Zheng and Smith 2019). Understanding more about their roles and experience promises new insights into labour management in Chinese MNCs.

The heavy use of expatriates in operational positions in subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs (e.g., Lee 2014; 2017; Rui et al. 2017; Zheng and Smith 2019) is strikingly

² Guanxi refers to the personal and often reciprocal relationships or connections between individuals, which are built on mutual trust, respect, and obligations.

different from other countries, such as the US and Japan (Zheng and Smith 2019, p.492). High numbers of Chinese workers are seen in the subsidiaries of various industries, including mining and construction (Lee 2014; Zheng 2008), and also in other sectors like telecommunications (Cooke 2012). Some have argued that the high use of operational expatriates can be attributed to three main factors. First, China's plentiful supply of relatively low-cost labour, second, the skill shortage of workers in host countries, and third, China's early stage of internationalisation (Rui et al. 2017; Wood et al. 2014; Zhang and Fan 2014). In addition, a range of other explanations have been proposed. Cooke (2012, 2014), for example, identified reliance on personal trust relations in the management of overseas subsidiaries as an impulse to the deployment of Chinese expatriates in high numbers. Shen and Edwards (2006) also point out that Chinese MNCs use expatriates who have *guanxi*, or positive social relations, with trusted managers. The role played by *guanxi* in expatriation is discussed more fully in Chapter 3 and 4 and reflects the MNC's need to be able to rely on expatriate workers as they adjust to the overseas environment. Perhaps even more notable, is the theory that the high use of Chinese expatriates in operational roles can be explained by Chinese workers' cultural adjustment and identity, which are bound up with a supposed capacity for compliance, hard work and 'hardship tolerance'. The premise is that these attributes in expatriates are relied upon by Chinese MNCs as a critical source of competitive advantage (Rui et al. 2017; Lai et al. 2020; see also Lai et al. 2016). These claims are contested and will be returned to in Chapter 3. However, other propositions about the high use of Chinese expatriates are also subject to challenge. These claims are contested and will be returned to in more detail in Chapter 3. However, it is worth noting at this point that studies of workers in other places and other times have brought forward similar examples of collective compliance. There are issues of relevance here, for example, with the work of C. Wright Mills (1951, 2002) and his seminal study of white collar workers in the US. Wright Mills concluded that the pursuit of higher income, status

and associated social power underpinned middle-class workers' 'frames of acceptance' of their conditions at work (Wright Mills, 1951, 2002, p. 232). To a large extent these factors also influenced the thinking of my respondents, even if power and status might have been encompassed by broader ideas of guanxi. The behaviours of white-collar workers in mid-twentieth century America, for example, constructed "frames of acceptance" to rationalise their working lives. Wright Mills (1951, 2002, pp. 234-235) highlights the "new justifications" that were necessary at the time of his study to "secure and increase the will to work" – these might be nationalism, national ideals, appeals to power, status and higher incomes – essentially a range of tools intended to make the worker 'happy', combat worker alienation and promote their identification with the company. In my results I found that workers used quite similar justifications for staying in their posts, as part of having little choice to change track. Reference to the work of Wright Mills (1951) highlights the universality of such initiatives and undermines the proposition that the tools used by Chinese MNCs in controlling their expatriates are somehow distinctively 'Chinese'. However, there is one important distinction between the workers studied by Wright Mills and the expatriates in this research, and that is the control of living spaces and leisure outside work. Unlike in Wright Mills's (1951, 2002, pp. 235-238) study, work and life are not "sharply split" in my research. In the cases studied here, dormitory arrangements and other forms of accommodation blur the boundaries between work and life outside work.

In addition to the complexities of Chinese identity, other propositions about the high use of Chinese expatriates are also subject to challenge. Smith and Zheng (2016, p. 376; also Zheng and Smith 2019) point out that numbers of Chinese expatriates are generally high, irrespective of whether subsidiaries are sited in low wage or high wage economies. Chinese workers are often expatriated to host countries where local labour is cheaper (see Rui et al. 2017; Zhang and Fan 2014). Reliance on expatriates cannot therefore be explained (as has been suggested) by workforce

costs in host countries. Nor can it be assumed that expatriates are compensating for a lack of host-country skills – Chinese MNCs locate subsidiaries in developed and emerging economies alike, and host-country workforce skills vary. Using high numbers of Chinese expatriates cannot be simply a pragmatic solution to a range of practical issues in subsidiaries. Rather, the Chinese MNC's preference for home-sourced workers over local workers may be strategic (Zheng 2008, p.6).

Once again, a range of options is offered to explain strategic intent. One argument is that the high use of Chinese expatriates is linked to China's investment in infrastructure projects as part of its national political, economic and trading strategies (see for example, Selwyn 2017; Gonzalez-Vicente 2019). In emerging economies China's government aid and infrastructure projects may underpin other forms of outward expansion (Jackson 2012; Komoche and Siebers 2014; see also Lee 2017 and Fei 2021 for a critique of the postcolonial argument). A second proposition is that to be successful in an international arena, global firms need managers with a 'global mindset' that "cannot be developed through domestic education and work experience, but it grows with hands-on experience in a variety of different cultural environments" (Meyer and Xin 2018, p.1828; see also Jackson & Horwitz 2018). However, evidence suggests that Chinese expatriates may not be expected or encouraged to integrate culturally in the wider environment of a host country. This is especially the case where dormitory style living arrangements distance expatriates from host-country influences. The "relative disembeddedness [of the Chinese expatriate] from local contexts" is a prevalent feature of Chinese expatriation (for example Gonzalez-Vicente 2019, p. 496; see also Cooke 2012; Smith and Zheng 2016; Zheng and Smith 2019). This raises the question of how expatriates schooled in the values and ideals of the Chinese system may be able to understand and adapt to different cultural contexts and to the different labour institutions they encounter in host countries, such as independent trade unions, (for example, Meyer and Xin 2018).

These broader debates around motivations for Chinese investment and labour usage sit alongside the country-of-origin discourse and the institutionalist approach, but none of the explanations are entirely satisfactory. Accordingly, Zheng and Smith (2019), have raised the question of whether a fuller analysis of the ways that Chinese MNCs use expatriates may require a new perspective on expatriation more generally. In common with other scholars, they have also acknowledged the need for more research at the micro-level to explore the implications of the labour management strategy of Chinese MNCs in their overseas subsidiaries (see also, Cooke 2009, 2011; Shen and Edwards 2004; Zheng and Lamond 2009; Zhu et al. 2014).

In analysing labour strategies, Zheng and Smith (2019, p. 496) suggest that extensive numbers of Chinese workers schooled in the tenets of compliance and loyalty are relied on to maintain the stability of subsidiaries. However, Smith and Zheng (2016, p. 376) do not link compliance with 'Chineseness' arguing "it is not the nationality of labour that is important, but rather *the level of dependency of workers in the overseas location*" (emphasis added) that matters for expectations of worker compliance. Zheng and Smith (2019, p.489) have also questioned whether it is time to revisit "the theoretical underpinning of expatriates as a concept" and examine the social relations of expatriation to provide deeper insights into the different types of expatriation and workforce segmentation in subsidiaries of Chinese MNCs. Micro-studies of individual experiences and motivations may have potential value in this respect, and this was a motivation for this doctoral research.

Globally, increasing flows of capital and labour mean that employees have more international opportunities to seek different jobs and this has opened up the markets for the sourcing of professional and managerial employees (Zheng and Smith 2019; von Koppenfels 2014). Briscoe et al. (2012), also note that the increase of cross-country flow of capital and labour has increased the diversity of the global workforce and provided more choice for MNCs in terms of their international workforce. Hence,

in today's world, many expatriates are "self-initiated expatriates" (Anderson et al. 2014) rather than being firm-assigned. Zheng and Smith (2019, p. 491) describe self-initiated expatriates as "individualistic and career-focused" when compared with their firm-assigned counterparts. In DMNCs the choice and motivation of the individual applicant has traditionally played a significant role in expatriation (Moore 2017). However, in Chinese MNCs this individual agency cannot be taken for granted. In the primary research for this dissertation, for example, the majority of research participants had been firm-assigned as their expatriate assignment was generally given to them *after* employment had been confirmed (although for those assigned to fast track expatriate streams this was a very quick process).

In the Chinese context in particular, a factor that is inextricably linked with individual agency, is the possibility of a reasonable and acceptable alternative. Smith (2010) has pointed to the opportunities that may present themselves through the "double indeterminacy of labour". This refers to the *effort* expended by the worker in relation to their ability to be *mobile* – either to progress or quit a particular employer. Labour mobility is a crucial source of leverage for any worker, as Smith (2010, p.270) highlights,

individual ownership of mobility power by the worker ensures any stay with a particular employer or occupation or skill is always dependent on an exchange bargain – over work effort and mobility opportunities (that is, opportunities to increase the value of labour power, through training, development, career progression etc.) that the exchange facilitates.

The mobility of *capital* has been championed as a means of creating wealth as part of the broader liberalization of markets and the neoliberal context for development. Though the outcomes in terms of the distribution of wealth throughout society are contested (for example, Harvey 2005; Selwyn 2017) the mobility to take investment elsewhere is routinely used as leverage by corporations to influence their bargains

with supplier countries and employers. In contrast, the mobility of *labour* can exert leverage over the employer. Thus, in multinational and transnational corporations “workforce mobility is intertwined with the firm’s management practices” (Andrijasevic and Sacchetto 2016, p. 344). In the findings chapters the perception of mobility power among Chinese expatriate respondents to this research will be highlighted.

The level of the expatriate’s individual agency can also be illuminated by trends in repatriation. Repatriation refers to expatriates’ return to their home country after completing their international tasks, and it is generally regarded as the final stage of the expatriation process. The most common challenge for those who re-enter their home country is to deal with culture shock at work and in life (Dowling et al. 1999). Having had experience of working and living in a foreign country for several years, individuals may encounter difficulty in different aspects after returning to their home country. In the experience of DMNCs, Scullion (1994) identified that employees are more likely to be reluctant to accept international assignments if companies ignore or do not deal with expatriates’ re-entry problems appropriately (see also Dowling and Welch 2004; Moore 2017; Shen and Edwards 2006). Readjustment to home country context involves dealing with reverse culture shock and career demands, which is deemed the most difficult to handle (Shen and Edwards 2006). Some DMNCs now sign contracts with expatriates to guarantee them an equivalent job in the home country at the end of an expatriate assignment. They also provide training courses to help expatriates on their return, but evidence shows that there is still a gap in what DMNCs do to enable effective reintegration of expatriates into their home country business (Santoso and Loosemore 2013; Pinnington 2011).

In *Chinese* MNCs the picture of what happens to repatriates is not entirely clear in the literature, though there are references to poor care in this respect (Fei 2021, p. 675). Repatriation management has been to some extent ignored, which may perhaps be because of the relatively short history of internationalisation in Chinese MNCs (Shen and Edwards 2006). However, the returning expatriate may find that

their time outside China leaves their career path and development uncertain. Their posting on returning home may be completely disconnected from their international experience because domestic Chinese managers can see work in subsidiaries as irrelevant to the domestic business (Shen and Edwards 2006). Also, a Chinese repatriate cannot rely on the same economic, social and relational capital – *guanxi* – as a domestic employee who has established a relationship with domestic managers. The lack of transparency in the fate of expatriates along the pathway of their career demands further research as the numbers of Chinese expatriates working abroad increases.

2.5 Conclusion

At the present time, even though there is an emerging trend of studies looking at Chinese expatriates working outside China (for example, Lai et al. 2020; Zheng and Smith 2019), the study of IHRM in Chinese MNCs remains a relatively underdeveloped area when compared with studies of DMNCs (Zhong et al. 2015; Cooke et al. 2020). Previous studies of expatriation in DMNCs typically view expatriation through the lens of “agency” and expatriates’ capital role in line with the parent MNC’s objectives. However, these approaches cannot fully explain the way Chinese expatriation works.

There are many distinguishing elements to Chinese expatriation. The extensive use of operational and technical expatriates in Chinese MNCs is indicative of a distinctive approach to mobilising Chinese workers on a worldwide scale. This is not necessarily linked to attempts to influence host-country ways of working, nor can it be explained by labour costs, as Chinese workers are often employed in host countries where labour is cheaper (see Rui et al. 2017; Zhang and Fan 2014). Furthermore, Chinese expatriates are frequently housed in dormitory arrangements which distance them from host country cultural influences.

The majority of current research into Chinese expatriation is somewhat dominated by 'top-down' enquiry. Not only is there is a relative lack of knowledge of how Chinese MNCs actually organise their work and manage their employees globally (Zhu and Wei 2014; see also Liu et al. 2016), there is also relatively little first-hand testimony from Chinese expatriates about their individual experiences. This remains a gap in the existing literature (Smith and Zheng 2016; Zhu & Wei 2014; Zhu et al. 2014).

More recently, there have been some notable empirical studies of expatriate management in Chinese MNCs. The work of scholars such as Zheng and Smith (2019), Liu and Smith (2016) and Lai et al. (2020), have made significant contributions to the understanding of the life of the Chinese expatriate (see also, Smith and Zheng 2016; Zhu 2018). However, the majority of the previous research on expatriation has been conducted with access provided at firm level, which is also the mainstream in the study of Chinese MNCs. While firm-level studies do help to understand broader strategies for expatriation, there is still relatively limited knowledge of how exactly Chinese MNCs organise their overseas work and manage their workers (Zheng and Smith 2016; Zhu and Wei 2014). Furthermore, the predominant firm-level research has provided relatively little knowledge about the lives of individual expatriates (Cooke et al. 2020). Since Chinese MNCs rely on such an extensive number of Chinese expatriates, their mobilisation, career development and wellbeing need more attention.

This study investigates expatriation management from a micro-perspective to understand individual expatriates' experiences of expatriation. The aim is to contribute to the IHRM literature and research field through analysis of the concrete experiences of individuals of their expatriation and repatriation pathways. The objective of this 'bottom-up', micro-level approach is to respond to calls in the literature for small studies that reveal the outcome of expatriation for individual expatriates (Cooke et al. 2020). Also, as Smith and Zheng (2016) argue, the entry of Chinese MNCs onto the global stage provides an opportunity to consider the nature

of current labour management in China, particularly since Chinese MNCs are likely to carry strong home practices with them. As management practices in China are enormously influenced by its distinctive political, economic and historical context, Chapter 3 will next consider these issues as a context for the development of Chinese HRM and the approach to expatriation.

Chapter 3: The Chinese Context and the Evolution of Chinese HRM

A local labour control regime (local LCR) is a historically contingent and territorially embedded set of mechanisms which coordinate the time-space reciprocities between production, work, consumption and labour reproduction within a local labour market (Jonas 1996, p.325).

3.1 Introduction

All work takes place in a particular context. As Cooke et al. (2020, p.4) highlight, "...context remains critical in understanding how people perceive the nature of their work, the quality of workplace relationship, and the effect of HRM practices." The regimes of production, accumulation and control that apply in any working environment will vary according to institutional frameworks as well as cultural and sectoral norms. Workers are exposed to these influences in their daily lives and their expectations of work are moulded by their experiences of their local conditions (see Jonas 1996; also Warde 1989). This chapter will consider the significance of the political and economic development of China for the evolution of Chinese human resource management, workers' expectations and characteristics of the Chinese expatriate.

In China as elsewhere, the state plays an important role through the education system, political affiliation and wider societal structures. Researchers have highlighted the importance of the Chinese political, historical, cultural and social context for analysing issues of work and employment inside China (for example, Cooke et al. 2021; Cooke et al. 2020; Cooke 2011, 2012, 2017; Liu and Smith 2016; Yao et al. 2016; Warner 2008, 2011; Child 2009). As Gold and Smith (2022, p. 77) point out, "HR practices cannot be abstracted from the institutions and cultures in which they take place". The issue of 'Chineseness' as a predictor of worker behaviour has also featured strongly in the literature on Chinese HRM (for example, Warner 2008, 2011; Lai 2016; Lai et al. 2020; Rui et al. 2017).

China's form of capitalism has proved difficult to categorise and even though the Chinese state is powerful, its influence does not create the same conditions everywhere. Work opportunities vary according to a range of factors such as education, differences between rural and urban environments, city and regional specialisms, and also the nature of relationships between different types of firms and the state (Smith and Liu 2016 pp. 1-28; Zhang and Peck 2016). Moreover, internationally there are additional factors that influence conditions of work that are not 'historically contingent and territorially embedded' in China. Sectoral conditions are a likely influence on workers' experiences, as is the entanglement of China's economy with global supply chains (Zhang and Peck 2016; see also Liu and Smith 2016). The interaction of all these factors provides a complex and multi-layered context for the management of Chinese expatriates.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. Section one briefly explains the unique political, economic, and historical development of the People's Republic of China. The section is subdivided into three chronological periods, with a particular focus on years after 1978, when China's reform and opening-up policy was launched. It links phases in HRM to these chronological periods. The second main section of the chapter considers the high technology sector and its close relationship with the Chinese state. The third section of the chapter considers the characteristics attributed to Chinese workers – and Chinese HRM – in the context of the ideals of a harmonious society, as championed by the state.

3.2 Economic Development in the People's Republic of China

The last four decades have seen the rapid development of China's economy. It has become the second largest economy in the world. The speed of the rise of China has had a significant impact on the global business environment and has drawn the attention of academia. Just before the challenges of Covid its growth had slowed to 6.5% when considering its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Trading Economics

2019). In 2022, the GDP only increased by 3.0% compared to the previous year at constant prices, reaching a total of 121,020.7 billion yuan (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2023). This section of the chapter charts how China transitioned from a largely domestic economy to one that now engages globally.

3.2.1 Economic Development 1949-1978

The People's Republic of China was established in 1949, following a period of international conflict in World War II and internal civil war in China, which was won by the Communists. China initially followed the Soviet model of economic development. China's first Five-Year plan, from 1953 to 1957, tried to develop its domestic economy and address the negative impact of the civil war. At this period, China started its economic transformation through the transfer of production from private to public entities as well as the nationalisation of industries (Hsia 1959). The Communist approach to economic development is the distinctive feature of the state-controlled economy.

In these early years of the People's Republic, the war in nearby Korea (1950-1953), was enormously costly to China. The Chinese government sent the People's Voluntary Army to support North Korea and this commitment led to the delay of Chinese post-war reconstruction. Furthermore, China was suffering from the Great Famine which led to millions of deaths during the period from 1959 to 1961 (Chen and Yang 2015; Chu et al. 2016; Child 1994, p.37). As people struggled to survive the harshest of conditions, their working lives were entirely governed by the state.

In the 1950s, China developed its own approach to people management (*renshi guanli*) based on the Soviet Industrial model, and the most distinctive characteristic between 1949 and 1978 was the 'iron rice-bowl' (*tie fan wan*) employment system (Warner 2011; Cooke 2005; Warner 1995, 2009a, 2009c; Zhu and Warner 2019). The most representative feature of 'iron rice-bowl' was the subservience of people management to the centrally planned economy (Ding et al. 1997) and loyalty to the

ideology of the Communist Party (Li and Nesbit 2014). There was little short-term concern about productivity and performance; loyalty to the Party was paramount above any other elements such as technical competency and career development (Cooke 2011, 2008; Zhu 2005; Warner 1993). Lin (2004) further identifies that training and management skills were not regarded as essential for advancement – the key attribute demanded of an employee was Party loyalty.

Personnel management in this historical phase highlighted the tight control of the state over policies and practices in organisations. Also, the state's intervention extended to the structure and responsibility of personnel functions, that is, performance management. All levels of managers in the organisation were only permitted to take part in the administrative function and policy formulation subject to strict [state] policy guidance (Cooke 2005). At this time, the wage gap in society was relatively small due to the influence of the egalitarian and socialist ideologies prevailing in China, which maintained that monetary incentives and personal advancement were contradictory to national ideals (Cooke 2011).

The period of the Cultural Revolution overlapped with this early phase. It lasted ten years (1966-1976) and imposed new upheaval. The Cultural Revolution adopted a rhetoric of fighting for the proletariat (Leese 2011; Teiwes 2007) while consolidating the central ideological authority of Mao Tse-tung³ (see Russo 2013). It targeted every aspect of society, ranging from urban-rural segregation to a focus on building heavy industry, and

rearrangements of educational systems from nursery school to higher education, [focused on] the work unit as the core of society and for all urban residents, and, most of all, the supremacy of the Party (Lin 2011, p.83)

³ Mao Tse-tung is based on a Wade-Giles-derived system, while Mao Zedong is a pinyin-derived spelling.

Essentially, the Cultural Revolution aimed to root out all bourgeois classes and individuals and reduce private properties and inequality to the minimum. It caused great social upheaval and many people died. The associated political turmoil severely negatively impacted Chinese society in the realms of economy, ethics, and culture.

The Cultural Revolution did not end until the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978. Once the new principles of the Third Plenum were established, China started to move away from the ideology of the Cultural Revolution, and there was at that time a major focus on economic development. This was when Deng Xiaoping proposed “emancipating the mind, seeking truth from facts and uniting as one” (Hofman 2018). One of his famous sayings, “crossing the river by feeling for stones” (Zhang and Peck 2016, p.66), reflected his strong will to reform the Chinese economy pragmatically (Lin 2011). Deng adopted an incrementalist and experimental approach and avoided relying on one development paradigm. In the decades that followed, this approach led to variegated forms of capitalism developing within China – there are the different forms of capitalism related to regions, provinces and sectors (Zhang and Peck 2016).

3.2.2 Economic Development 1978-1999

The year 1978 was a remarkable turning point for the development of China as the ‘reform and opening-up’, also called the Open Door Policy as introduced. The second-generation leadership of the Chinese government by Deng Xiaoping launched the policy (Hofman 2018; Morris et al. 2002). This can be deemed the beginning of China’s economic reform, which has played a critical and fundamental role in the economic development of China for the past four decades. The Open Door Policy aimed to attract FDI to facilitate Chinese domestic development and indicated that China had started its insertion into the global economy. This phase of institutional reform can also be related more clearly to HR management reforms.

Warner (2010, p. 2057), for example, associates this period with the earliest manifestations of something approximating to personnel management (renshi guanli) in China, which relates to the 'phasing out of the "iron rice-bowl" (tie fan wan) and associated developments in the later 1980s. By the 1990s, in parallel with the implementation of China's 'reform and opening-up' policy, Warner (2011) suggests that indigenous human resource management (renli ziyuan guanli) emerged. This refers to "labour force resources management" and can be deemed as a form of HRM (Warner 2011, p, 3229; see also in Warner 2008). One of the significant changes at this time was the allocation of autonomy and responsibility personnel management practices at the level of the firm (Cooke 2011). An example of this change could be seen in the "adoption of performance-related bonus schemes to supplement low wages" (Cooke 2011, p.4).

These changes were in line with what Deng Xiaoping termed the 'Four Modernisations' to build China as a sustainable, stable, prosperous, and orderly society (see Morris et al. 2002). He started to move away from Stalinist institutions, instituting reforms in schools and higher education, introducing pay differentials, and increasing private property and ownership (Lin 2011). China was gradually shifting from being a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy, which included more types of corporate ownership, such as collectively owned enterprises and the publicly-owned shares of mixed enterprises, as well as the traditional SOEs (Chen 2005). The reform process has encompassed privatisation as a significant aspect, although it is worth mentioning that Chinese policy-making circles deliberately refrain from using the term "privatization." Instead, they favour more neutral terms such as "corporatization" or "marketization" (Morris et al. 2002, p.362). Deng Xiaoping also created a series of special economic zones for business, including Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Xiamen and Shantou, which enjoyed relatively little of the bureaucratic regulation and intervention that was said to hamper economic growth (see Child 1994, pp.51-54).

3.2.3 *Economic Development from 1999 onwards*

In 1999, the Going Out Policy was published, emphasising market and resource seeking motives. It was announced by the third-generation leadership of the Chinese government, represented by the Chinese president, Jiang Zemin. Its aim was to develop the reforms already underway and accelerate outward foreign direct investment, (OFDI) further opening the Chinese domestic market to improve China's global competitiveness (China Policy 2017; Chinese Government 2011). This policy revealed that the Chinese government was determined to increase its engagement in worldwide competition. It was also a solid preparation for China to gain access to the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Thanks to the *Going Out Policy*, Chinese outward OFDI substantially increased, which led in turn to the rapid expansion of Chinese MNCs, from the early twenty-first century onwards (Kolstad and Wiig 2012; Vendryes 2012). During two five-year-plans (2006-2015), the *Going Out Policy* was rapidly accelerated, providing a solid foundation for Chinese firms to internationalise. An unprecedented surge of Chinese OFDI has been seen since the mid-2000s, increasing by 40 per cent from 2005 to 2014 (Smith and Zheng 2016). Investment is spread across multiple areas, including the natural resources domain, construction, agriculture and telecommunication industries (Kolstad and Wiig 2012; Cooke 2012). Warner (2010, p.2058) suggests this period "represents the implementation in the Chinese context of what is sufficiently recognisable as contemporary HRM". An aspect of this shift is that many Chinese workers have been sent to work as expatriates outside China (Prange 2012). The Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM 2017) reported that Chinese labour service personnel overseas had reached

979,000.⁴ Based on the Annual Report on China International Labour Cooperation (2019-2020), it has been revealed that the number has reached 992,000.

More recently, China's policies have been to expand the *Going Out Policy* into the related, ambitious *One Belt and One Road Initiative*, which is a political and economic strategy focusing on infrastructure development and investments beyond China's borders. Currently, the policy is being implemented in around 152 countries dispersed across Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. It was announced by the Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013. This project is a persistent link to the economic reform programme and is essential to the *Going Out* strategy. The Chinese government first declared that it planned to invest 40 billion US dollars in the project, and it has since added 100 billion RMB (approximately 14.7 billion US dollars).

3.2.4 Evaluating Economic Reform and the Implications for Human Resource Management in China

It appears to critics that China's economic development has moved to become a capitalist model instead of a socialist counterpart. The privatisation of SOEs is an example reflecting such concerns (see Morris et al. 2002). The attitude of the Chinese government towards this criticism was perhaps summed up years ago by Deng Xiaoping, who explained it as "socialism with Chinese characteristics". He said, "it doesn't matter whether it is a white cat or a black cat, as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat" (China Daily 2 August 2004, p. 1). Ideological labels appeared to be less important to him than the outcome, which was to develop China's economy (Lin 2011). However, scholars who have tried to categorise China's development have also concluded that the scale of variation within China makes it extremely difficult to arrive at a robust or uncontentious label (see for example, Filgstein and Zhang 2011;

⁴ Source:

<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/statistic/foreigntradecooperation/201802/20180202715837.shtml>

Zhang and Peck 2016; Witt and Redding 2014; see also Sallai and Schnyder 2021). Accepting that it is difficult to define China as a standardised ideal type or 'variety of capitalism' (Fligstein and Zhang 2011; Peck and Zhang 2013) because "writers place [China] in different boxes" (Gold and Smith 2022, p. 75), a more nuanced approach is needed. This is reflected in the *variegated* capitalism theoretical frame that allows a more fluid understanding of capitalism in China (see Zhang and Peck 2016).

In the same way, categorising a particular 'style' of Chinese HRM is also complicated. There is a huge variation in HR practice in China, just as there is in liberal market economies (LMEs) where it is claimed that a 'free market identity' influences HRM, or in coordinated market economies (CMEs) where state intervention and collective bargaining to regulate the employment relationship is supposedly the norm (Gold and Smith, 2022, p. 73-74). In reality, all such categorisations are open to question (Gold and Smith, 2022, p. 75-76). Variability in the implementation of HRM has always been apparent not only *between* but also *within* different countries and sectors (Storey 1995). When the discussion moves to China, categorisation of 'Chinese HRM' is further complicated by the complexity and contradictions of this world power.

Economic reform can be deemed a success if defined by its objectives to reduce absolute poverty and increase China's economic wealth (Fligstein and Zhang 2011; Lin 2011). However, due to economic transformations, disparities in development have emerged across various provinces and cities, bringing inequality to the forefront. For example, the increasing incidence of private enterprises purchasing state assets at a low price was apparent, and the increase in social inequality has gathered pace, especially since the 2000s. Around that time, in order to mitigate anxiety caused by the different forms of social inequalities - the consequences of the labour surplus and social welfare issues during the privatisation reform period (see Morris et al. 2002), the concept of the 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*) came to the forefront of government language and policy. This concept and focus on harmony

in the government's approach to society may be an important contributing factor in the reputation Chinese workers have for compliance, though in the real world it does not guarantee behaviour.

The harmonious society was proposed in 2005 by President Hu Jintao, (presidential tenure 2003-2012). This policy aimed to re-evaluate China's domestic and international realities. It paid increasing attention to improving social welfare, equality, and the environment (Zhao 2012; Warner 2008, 2009b). The Party leaders had become increasingly aware of emergent social tensions arising from the less egalitarian income and wealth distribution in China, and it was said that they intended to maintain social harmony by somewhat appeasing the 'losers', without unduly penalising the 'winners' (Warner 2008, p.778). This is a theme that continues to be central to HRM and employment relations in China. The harmonious society and harmony are discussed fully in section three of this chapter.

Global players, such as the US and the European Union (EU) have been concerned at China's development. Concerns relate to the role of Chinese domestic politics and the new Chinese activism in foreign investment. For example, Gonzalez-Vicente (2019, p.495) suggests that there are fears that,

the BRI [Belt and Road Initiative] seeks precisely to expand China's now exhausted growth model into new market frontiers, providing a lifeline to China's infrastructural sector while building networks that could also secure international competitiveness, market access, and geoeconomic goals

Also, Wang (2016), argues that China's domestic political economy is one of the major driving forces behind the *Going Out Policy*. In particular, the grand One Belt and *One Road strategy*, has generated great enthusiasm inside China. Official rhetoric portrays it as a win-win arrangement for China as well as the country or region of the world where Chinese investment is made. The idea is that by building infrastructure to connect different parts of the world with China, and supporting and

trading with other developing countries, everyone wins. More cynical observers are concerned that the investment and initiatives are part of China's growing sphere of economic and political influence. The US in particular has been worried that China's increasing dominance may threaten American hegemony (see Shifrinson 2019; Kim 2019). During the fieldwork period, President Donald Trump commenced a trade war with Chinese high technology giants. As the findings chapters reveal, this trade war significantly affected the working conditions of expatriates. In terms of undertaking fieldwork, it had greater impact than even the Covid pandemic, as almost overnight expatriate respondents were working around the clock and this affected time available for regular interviews.

US fears of Chinese dominance are intensified by the fact that economic reform is still ongoing. President Xi has proposed a new policy direction for the new era (that is 2020-2025), which he has called 'socialist modernisation'. This may be defined as,

market-based allocation, [with] a dominant role for public ownership and a strong emphasis on industrial policy, science, and technology to achieve the goals of the first phase of the new era (2020-2025) (Hofman 2018, p.63).

The goals for the 2020-2025 era are along the same lines as Deng Xiaoping envisioned in 1978 as 'Four modernisations', namely of agriculture, national defence, science and technology. The emphasis on technological development is particularly relevant to this research, as all respondents are employed by two Chinese telecommunications giants.

3.3 National Champions - High Technology Telecommunications in China

Telecommunications is a sensitive industry in China. It has been tightly linked with economic, political, and social objectives in China's national interest (Breznitz and Murphree 2011; Child and Rodrigues 2005; Zhang 2002). In order to achieve the ambitious goal of becoming a 'global technological force' and creating 'globally competitive indigenous firms' (Low 2010), China's telecommunications industry has

long been characterised by state control and market closure to foreign investment (Loo 2004). The industry has not only received direct financing and policy support from the central government (Breznitz and Murphree, 2011; Child and Rodrigues 2005; Low, 2010) but has also had domestic market protection (see Mu and Lee 2005 for a review) and support for international expansion (Cooke 2012; Low 2007). An example of the support the industry has received can be seen in the case of the development of Shenzhen.

In the 1990s Shenzhen was selected as a special economic zone and since then has been transformed from the agriculturally based Bao'an County into a modern metropolis (see Ng 2003, for a review of the development of Shenzhen in detail; see also in Zhang 2012). Its population was over 12 million by 2020 (Statista 2020). World-renowned high technology giants' headquarters of Tencent, Huawei and ZTE are based in Shenzhen (Wang and Lin 2008) and it focuses on high technology communications and innovation. It is described as a city with the "environment of Singapore and efficiency of Hong Kong" (Shenzhen Municipal Government 2000, pp 1–2).

The level of state investment in the high technology sector may be seen in this example. Shenzhen New and High technology Production Investment Services Company was established in 1996 with a registered investment of 100 million RMB, to support high technology businesses looking for bank financing (Shenzhen Museum 1999, p 399). The production value of Shenzhen increased tenfold from 1990 to 2001, reaching RMB 132 billion (Shenzhen Statistics Bureau 2002, p 74). From 1993 to 2001, foreign direct investment climbed by a factor of 2.5 folds (Shenzhen Statistics Bureau 2002, p 198). More recently, the Chinese central government formally issued the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (the New GBA Plan). This plan will connect these south provinces and cities for future economic, technological and innovative development (Chinese GOV. 2019). In particular, the "Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong

Kong-Macao” connection is to be created as an innovation and technology corridor. A big data centre for the Greater Bay Area and platforms for global innovation are also being jointly developed.

Shenzhen city has also been given an exceptionally high level of local policy-making autonomy, including the authority to propose local laws, as a result of being chosen as the location for one of China’s two stock exchanges (Zhang and Peck 2016). This city stands as an example of the development that has been achieved with the central government’s support and sponsorship and indicates how much importance the state places on this sector. The two companies that employed research participants in this study also originate from here.

Strong links between Chinese telecommunications firms and the central government have raised concerns in other countries about national security threats (Zhang et al. 2011; Li et al. 2014; Cooke 2012). The Chinese government has been assisting domestic high technology enterprises in developing their technologies in order to reduce reliance on foreign-owned technology and break through the western blockade created by the Sino-US trade war. Accordingly, the government has introduced pro-business policies and direct sponsorship as an important aspect of the country’s rejuvenation (Lai et al. 2020; Li et al. 2014; Breznitz and Murphree 2011). However, the ongoing political and technological blockade has undoubtedly increased pressure on the Chinese high technology industry.

In this context, perhaps the pressures faced by companies has transferred to their workers, increasing the prevalence of intensive working practices such as ‘996’⁵ and ‘007’⁶ intensive working schedules, however, are not unique to China. Arguably, ‘996’ and ‘007’ working are Chinese versions of the ‘hustle culture’ that began in

⁵ 9am-9pm, 6 days per week

⁶ Midnight to midnight, 7 days per week.

Silicon Valley, in the United States (Liu and Zhong 2019; Nguyen and Kang 2021; Jackson-Gibson 2021). Furthermore, extreme long working hours is not confined to the high-tech sector in the international arena; there are also examples from the financial sector (see for example, Jones 2021). Such examples highlight the necessity of taking all contextual factors into account when trying to understand labour regimes, including sectoral norms.

A substantial body of research has pointed to the politicised nature of the Chinese business environment and the Chinese government's active participation in business activities (see, for example, Nee et al. 2007; Witt and Redding 2014; Cooke 2011, 2012; Low 2010; Sallai and Schnyder 2021). Despite the fact that China has undergone decades of economic reform and has a well-established market economy framework, the Chinese governing Party remains strongly interventionist (Witt and Redding 2014; Sallai and Schnyder 2021), and the government decides on resource allocation throughout the economy (Zhang et al. 2015). The government involvement in the governance of firms takes different forms. Some are fully or partly state owned (Shi et al. 2014) or have political connections with regulatory bodies (Cui and Jiang 2012). Others may be in a critical industry deemed closely related to the national interests (Breznitz and Murphree 2011; Child and Rodrigues 2005; Low 2010). Finally, there will be some firms that are slated to become national champions and are expected to further enhance the national interest (Li et al. 2014). Of the two firms that employed the expatriates interviewed for this research, one is state owned and one is privately owned, but both are categorised as national champions for China in the telecommunications sector.

What does it mean to be a national champion? Generally, in the process of Chinese firms' internationalisation, the Chinese government has supported them to enhance Chinese enterprises' risk-taking capability and reduce their reliance on prior overseas experience (Lu et al. 2014). State-owned MNCs are especially reliant on domestic institutions for resources because of their political ties to the government

(Cui and Jiang 2012). As Buckley et al. (2007) suggest, political affiliation and resource reliance can be viewed as a firm-specific advantage for many Chinese MNCs, as they benefit from low-cost capital as a result of capital market flows in their home country. They also benefit from appropriately educated workers. For example, there is a high concentration on science and engineering in China which is a good fit for the needs of companies that are looking to grow in a new technological environment. By 2014, around (58%) of Ph.D. students and 666,000 (44%) of M.A. students were in science or engineering (Han and Appelbaum 2018). Hoffman (2006, p.552) has referred to the University environments that channel graduates into firms like the ones employing research respondents as delivering a “flow” of ready-made talent as part of the process of creating a sort of “[p]rofessional subjecthood ... [exhibiting] neoliberal elements, Maoist era ideals and expressions of patriotism”. This flow of culturally attuned talent is an alternative to state assignment of jobs from days gone by. Arguably it is a considerable source of competitive advantage for the firms that benefit. For the graduates themselves, the four elements of “acceptance” identified by Wright Mills (1951, 2002, pp. 229-233) – namely, skill, income, power and status – are all bound up in the promise that is held out to them by a job with these leading corporations.

Moreover, as Mueller and Lovelock (2000) reported, the Chinese government prefers to protect national champions from fierce competition with foreign competitors and maximise their own market share. This is particularly the case in the high technology sector. In line with its aspirations for development, China has promoted a favourable national environment for science and technology research and development for many decades. The application of the policy of the ‘Four modernisations’ to agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence (Breznitz and Murphree 2011) was part of this drive. China’s 15-year ‘Medium- to Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology’, launched in 2006, has the goal of

making China an 'innovation-oriented society' by 2020 and a world leader in science and technology by 2050 (Cao et al. 2006; Chen et al. 2020; Witt 2019).

Although China's economy has increased rapidly over the last four decades, it was once claimed that innovation and technological development had been left far behind (Zhang and Wu 2012; see also in Child 1994, p.172-175). This has implications in the present day. For example, the Chinese domestic semiconductor industry lacks the capacity to manufacture its core technology and has been largely dependent on imports. This is a weakness that is currently being targeted in ongoing trade disputes. With the ban of 'advanced tech' firms from building facilities in China for a decade, as announced by the US Biden administration (*The Guardian* 2022), industries including telecommunication (smartphone) and AI have been (and will be) impacted negatively. To be more specific, taking the example of Huawei in 2021, its share of the global market fell dramatically, by an average annual loss of 81.6%, to just 3% (Lewis 2022). In order to maintain economic growth and facilitate the development of the high technology industry, the Chinese government is seeking to enhance the domestic technological development system and produce world-class products.

International tensions and suspicions of China are of serious importance to economic development (Wu et al. 2021), because the achievement of the ambitious goals set for the high technology sector have been seriously affected by the 'technological cold war' that has featured strongly in international trade since 2018. For example, Chinese telecommunication giants Huawei and ZTE have been banned from involvement in 5G networks by the majority of western countries (GOV.UK 2020; Kelion 2020). Growing suspicion of China's motives may be related to President Xi being awarded a second term with 100 per cent of the vote in the Thirteenth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China in 2018, some days after the lifting of presidential term limits allowed him to stay in office indefinitely (Griffiths and Schwarz 2018). Western observers suggest this be may a

sign of regression to the Mao era, when politics was dominated by personality cults and the centralisation of presidential power (see Yip 2021; BBC 2018; McDonell 2021). In this context, while Chinese MNCs are unlikely to agree with Western criticism of China, a key challenge for them is how to “balance the competing demands of home country and host country governments” (Li et al. 2014, p. 995).

Having considered state influence and links with the high technology sector, the next section considers the characteristics ascribed to Chinese workers in this context.

3.4 Characteristics of Chinese Workers – Compliance, Hardship Tolerance and the Harmonious Society

In conceptions of Chinese HRM, the capacity for the compliance of the Chinese worker has frequently set the tone of the debate. Yet, a ‘structured antagonism’ characterises the employment relationship in capitalist production (see Edwards, P. 1986). In short,

The basic relationships in production reveal both the basis for conflict and the problem of control at the workplace. Conflict exists because the interests of workers and employers collide, and what is good for one is frequently costly for the other (Edwards, R. 1979, p. 12).

Therefore, workers’ active cooperation and consent in the processes of production needs management because this cannot always be assured in a system where their interests in reward and control are not the same as those of their employers (Burawoy 1979; see also Braverman 1998; Edwards, P. 1986; Edwards, R. 1979).

Technically, such conflicts of interest might once have been said not to apply in China’s political context of a Communist state. Today, China has developed its own variegated relationship with capitalism, and the fundamental tension between “the need for labour control” and “the need for the creative participation of workers” embodied in capitalist production (Storper and Walker 1989, p.156) also applies in

Chinese workplaces, even though it is a different institutional, economic and political context.

3.4.1 *Harmonious Society*

Interpretation of national characteristics in relation to forms of capitalism is challenging for many reasons, especially in the Chinese context. This has not prevented claims being made about Chinese workers' pursuit of harmonious relationships, tolerance of hardship and their tendency to comply with authority. The regional, cultural, geographical and economic variation identified across China does not allow for a unified cultural perspective representing the whole country, given its scale and complexity (for example, Zhang and Peck 2016; Smith and Liu 2016; Danford and Zhao 2012). Nevertheless, the pursuit of harmony and its relationship with Confucianism is a long-standing area of interest in China, and there are many studies which focus on the impact of Confucian culture and its influence (Hwang 1997-1998; Chen 2001, 2002; Yao et al. 2016).

The core concept and implications of harmony – such as attitudes towards conflict – has great relevance for workers' agency, resistance and the nature of HRM and employment relations in China. It significantly impacts philosophical and managerial perspectives in workplaces and society at large, and can be considered in practical application, going beyond a purely cultural standpoint (Leung et al. 2002). Warner (2011), for example, has argued the influence and ideology of Confucianism is deeply embedded in HRM in China, which he suggests might be called 'Confucian HRM'.

The earliest recorded use of the word *harmony* (和谐) was found in the inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells from the Shang Dynasty (1600 to 1046 B.C. Li 2006), during which time it became popular because of Confucianism. Confucius was a Chinese philosopher and politician of the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.),

who is regarded as the paragon of Chinese sages. The Confucian philosophy of harmony is a core ideal which promotes personal and governmental morality, and kindness (Cheng 2011), and it continues to influence Chinese and East Asian culture and society to this day. In Confucian texts, harmony refers to sounds and how they interact with one another. For example, the musical instrument Chun (an ancient Chinese instrument) responds to drums when playing a song. However, this simple responsiveness does not equate with harmony. Harmony can only be achieved by sounds responding to one another in a mutually and rhythmically promoting, complementing, and stabilising way (Li 2006). Gradually, the Confucian idea of harmony was developed to describe how various sounds of animals, humans, and other instruments respond to one another. The notion of the harmonious interplay of sounds can be further expanded by analogous thinking, to connect with meaning in other contexts.

Confucianism was out of favour during the Cultural Revolution period in China, as Confucius' tenets were deemed "bourgeois and reactionary". However, the Party slowly made peace with Confucian ideas after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976. Today in particular, under Xi's era, Confucius's tenets are well suited for "preaching the virtues of a harmonious society and respect for authority" (The Economist 2021). As President Xi promotes Chinese political culture as an alternative to Western democracy, tying its ideology to a two-thousand-year-old heritage is a useful approach to give it legitimacy—especially since it is, unlike Marxism, a domestic philosophy. Confucianism is, in fact, referred to by President Xi as "the cultural soil that nurtures the Chinese people." (see The Economist 2021).

The core value of harmony is that it presupposes the coexistence of multiple parties of difference, for without difference there is no possibility of harmony. As Li (2006, p.589) highlights,

As far as harmony is concerned, [the] parties possess more or less equal significance. Therefore, harmony is always contextual; epistemologically it calls for a holistic approach. A mentality of harmony is a contextual mentality. In other words, persons of harmonious mentality see things, and make judgments on these things, in relation, in context, not in isolation or separation.

From Confucius' perspective, the over-presence of 'sameness' is not conducive to harmony (Leung et al. 2002; Leung and Brew 2009). Rather, harmony is conceptualised as the way that people should behave or conduct activities in accordance with a set of principles and rules (Li 2006; 2008; Leung et al. 2002). These principles and rules put emphasis on social obligations and high moral standards which, in theory, lead to more gentle management practices in China (Lin and Ho 2009). However, throughout history, dynastic rulers have often attempted to promulgate their own variety of ideologies, and they expect that only through uniformity can a harmonious society be achieved. While employers are not dynastic rulers, they hold the greatest power in the workplace, and employees are expected to comply. This expectation has to be set against all the tensions inherent in capitalist society (Edwards 1986), including inside China and along global supply chains (Smith and Liu 2016; Morris et al 2021; Selwyn 2017).

Arguably, harmony has been captured and interpreted in a certain way in modern China. It has been understood and emphasised as conflict-avoidance tactics – “giving up one's goal for the sake of another” (Leung et al. 2002, p.202). The proposition is that in order to maintain smooth relationships among colleagues, especially between subordinates and superiors, individuals should prioritise organisational interests over their own personal interests (Hwang 1997-1998). Child and Warner (2003) argued that this ideology of harmony influences individuals' attitudes and behaviours at work, and shapes managerial practices and styles. For example, the hierarchical system within state-owned firms in China is characterised by significant power distance between managers and subordinates and highlights

the expectation of loyalty to authority (Hwang 1997-1998; Chen 2001). While conflict avoidance and compliance is not exactly in line with the Confucian idea of harmony, it has been significantly emphasised and interpreted in modern China as a key ideology applicable to the workplace.

If these ideas of harmony were to be compared with Western approaches to managerial ideology, it is arguably most like the ideas that underpin a unitary perspective on employment relations (see, Fox 1966; see also Heery 2016; Gold and Smith 2022). In the western theory of understanding the employment relationship in workplaces, the unitary perspective assumes the organisation is an integrated group or even a family, and employers and employees share a fundamental commonality of interest, and that conflict is therefore dysfunctional (Fox 1966). Employers have the authority and duty to manage their employees and make decisions in the best interests of their employees and the organisation.

It is therefore possible to draw links between harmony and the unitary perspective. For example, Danford and Zhao (2012, p.842) noted,

...just as HRM in the West is associated strongly with unitarist principles of integration and harmony, managerial values in China are seen to be shaped increasingly by Confucian beliefs in benevolence, harmony, and loyalty to higher authorities.

There is a lot in the unitary perspective that is reflected in the paternalistic traditional Chinese management style (Cooke 2008; Warner 2009a; Child and Warner 2003). Theoretically, paternalistic leadership refers to “a style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence” (Farh and Cheng 2000, p. 91). Aycan (2006) claims that the paternalistic relationship demands superiors create a family atmosphere, and establish close individual relationships with their subordinates, even to the extent of interest or involvement in their social life. For the Chinese expatriate, such relationships with their employers are likely to be made at

the expense of the Chinese expatriate's actual family relations, as they rarely travel abroad with them. Separation from family is common during expatriate assignments. In DMNCs, such separation has become increasingly unacceptable as spouses have "independent careers ... [and are less prepared] ... to endure long separations ... [while] fewer individuals are prepared to live relatively solitary lives abroad" (Wood 2006, p. 271). In contrast, expatriation without accompanying family is the norm for most Chinese expatriates.

3.4.2 *Guanxi*

Guanxi plays a significant role in personal and business interactions in China. It involves building and nurturing relationships with others, which can lead to benefits such as access to resources, opportunities, and preferential treatment. This section explains how guanxi is understood in [Chinese] society and workplaces.

Guanxi is based on the idea of social capital, where the strength of a person's network can impact their social status and success. However, it is important to acknowledge that similar concepts exist in other societies. Extensive literature on social networks and social capital, including studies by Bian (2017, 2019), Bian and Zhang (2014), and Granovetter (1973; 1983; 1995), demonstrates that each society has its unique way of utilising and interpreting social networks. In Western societies, for example, the counterparts to guanxi can be observed in the form of "old-boy networks" and the like (Saloner 1985). Western countries, for example, often exhibit the prevalence of weak-tie networks (Granovetter 1995). To be more specific, weak-tie networks refer to social networks where connections between individuals are not very close or intimate but nevertheless exist. Western-style social networks have themselves been adapted to the Chinese context and may even be gaining prominence (Qi 2013). Similarly, studies in Turkey, for example, have illustrated that having acquaintances within the workplace can be beneficial when seeking employment (Nichols and Sugur 2004; Nichols et al. 2002). The body of literature on

social networks and social capital emphasises that while the utilisation and interpretation of social networks differ across societies, communities, organisations, and individuals, they are likely to exist in some form. The mutual expectations and obligations that exist within such networks reflect the importance of interpersonal relationships in a similar way that *guanxi* operates in the Chinese context. Such relationships generally exist within a hierarchical social order rather than challenging it (Lin et al. 2018; Bian 2019).

Thus, *guanxi* is not solely applicable to China. However, while other cultures may have similar concepts of social connections and networking, *guanxi* could be argued to be distinct for its emphasis on the intricate nature of relationships, the cultivation of trust and loyalty, and the exchange of favours (Bian 2019). In China today it is considered a fundamental aspect of Chinese society and can greatly influence personal and professional dynamics inside and beyond the working environment.

While it is possible to broadly define *guanxi* as a set of reciprocal social practices within a person's network of social connections (Bruning et al. 2012; Bian 2017, 2019), *guanxi* is not 'one thing' and it is not the same in all contexts. In fact, *guanxi* is a term that describes a range of complex relationships between different elements within social relations, including social resources, social capital and social network. In understanding how *guanxi* operates, the work of Bian (2019, p.25-27; see also 2018, p.615-616) is helpful. It identifies five different relational levels of *guanxi* in which specific types of social resources are embedded and enable the mobilisation of *guanxi* in different scenarios.

The first level of *guanxi* Bian (2019) identifies is a "tie of connectivity" at a fairly superficial level. For example, 'connectivity' might involve individuals who have met, are known to each other and have communicated within a shared group. The second level of *guanxi* represents a deeper "sentimental tie", that is an emotional connection, involving human emotions such as sympathy, care, trust, and love. This

level of guanxi would involve a sense of the need to provide selfless assistance to individuals within one's social network, devoid of obligation or expectations of reciprocity. At level three, sentiment is accompanied by obligation and Bian (2019) terms it a “sentiment-driven instrumental tie”, where if assistance is provided by one party to another, there are reciprocal implications and expectations. The fourth type identified by Bian is termed an “instrumental particular-tie”. The word ‘particular’ indicates that this form of guanxi would vary dependent upon the circumstances and it is likely to exhibit significant diversity in forms, yet with core norms of reciprocity, preserving face, and granting favours remaining paramount. At level five guanxi is an “obligational tie” and is commonly perceived as an informal contract. In this scenario, even where much is unspoken and the relationships may exhibit random variations, behaviours are deeply structured. Such obligational ties are seen in operation in a range of ways. For example, they may facilitate the allocation of land and real estate developments, smooth the progress of construction projects. They may also play a role in unauthorised services and transactions and underpin official corruption, as well as exchanges involving money for power and influence.

The categorisation of guanxi by Bian (2018, 2019) is valuable in helping us to comprehend its diversity and the importance of context. For an outsider, identifying a particular level of guanxi between two or multiple parties proves challenging, given its dynamic nature and the ongoing influence of various factors, including time. As a Chinese researcher I have had to become more reflective about guanxi as I came to understand there is much about it that I had previously taken for granted. I now understand the need to emphasise the variation of guanxi and that it can be initiated, cultivated, or gradually wane as time progresses. Above all, it is context specific.

As an integral element of workplace interactions, guanxi played a pivotal role in securing access for this research. Its significance and the distinct types or levels of guanxi that were employed across various relationships will be further elucidated in the Methods Chapter, Chapter 4. Specifically, the guanxi between respondents and

the author this will be detailed in the 'Negotiating Access' section of Chapter 4. However, it is also essential to understand guanxi between expatriates and their superiors, as well as expatriates and their families.

In workplaces, 'paternalism' can sometimes take the form of 'benevolent dictatorship', which, to a certain extent includes concern about employee welfare while not allowing them to take part in decision making (Aycaan 2006). There may be accompanying aspects of attempting to enhance employees' commitment and performance and generate trust relations – employers may refer to the workplace as a 'family' for example. Similarly, guanxi between managers and their subordinates can play an important role in trust relations and set expectations for employees' work commitment (Bian 2019; Wong et al. 2010). HRM in Chinese MNCs uses guanxi (Fang and Jones 2009) and in business relations more generally, as noted in Bian's typology (2018, 2019) smooth relations with key individuals provide a better way of contractual agreements (see also Guo et al. 2018; Xiao and Cooke 2012).

That said, even if guanxi is utilised in a business or working relationship, it need not originate in the workplace. For example, superior-subordinate guanxi may refer to "a personal relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate developed largely from non-work-related social interactions that might extend into the workplace" (Guan and Frenkel 2019, p.1753). Such externally-generated guanxi between supervisors and subordinates is said to contribute to the improvement of employees' performance and sense of harmony in the workplace. It is notable, however, that there is a hierarchical relationship within guanxi where one party enjoys higher power and social status than the other. Hwang (1987) argues that within hierarchies guanxi plays a role between employers and employees in avoiding conflict and maintaining a sense of mutual benefit and harmony. All these features of guanxi are present in the environment for expatriates. Potentially it plays a role in influencing expatriates' job performance, job satisfaction, and well-being (Bruning et al. 2012; Chiu et al. 2009). Thus the hierarchy of social relations inside and beyond the

workplace provides a context of power and relationships that are pivotal to the maintenance and use of guanxi by (and upon) expatriates (Guo et al. 2018. p.459).

For example, the personal relationship between employees and their superiors can positively impact their promotions or career development. Xian et al. (2017) found that guanxi positively impacts the high-performance work system and trust in Chinese state-owned enterprises. It is also suggested that Chinese employees are likely to be closer to those who perceive “in-group” colleagues as friends (Wang 2008). In this sense, the potential problem is that HR managers may use their position to offer special privileges – such as housing arrangements, the duration of the expatriate assignment and compensation – to expatriates to whom they are close. Accordingly, expatriates’ experience and career development can be significantly affected by guanxi-based management which is difficult to identify and challenge.

Challenge may in any case be very difficult. There are many scholars who have highlighted the oppressive nature of rigid labour controls in China (for example Chan et al. 2013; Lee 2009). There are material pressures that force compliance on Chinese workers – such as denial of collective representation, strict supervision, high targets and demands for long working hours – that are equally as powerful as loyalty to ideas of a harmonious society. Compliance may be forced upon Chinese workers domestically and in overseas subsidiaries. In this compulsion, the role of guanxi cannot be ignored. There are wider social costs of resistance for the individual employee, whether they work inside China or as an expatriate.

In summary, guanxi is important within the Chinese workplace and society. Its influence on expatriates’ response to their working lives is discussed in subsequent chapters and its specific use in gaining access for this research will be returned to in Chapter 4, Research Methods, where its role in negotiating access is discussed in detail.

3.4.3 Control, Hardship Tolerance and The Realities of Work

There are many examples that show that Chinese workers are not always in harmony with their employers; increasingly they do take collective action in pursuit of their own interests and demands (Danford and Zhao 2012; Smith and Liu 2016; Sheldon and Sanders 2016). There are also isolated examples of workers outside China winning concessions if conditions are right (Chan and Pun 2020). However, this is not the norm. There is considerable variation in conditions (see Smith and Zheng 2016, pp.369-374) in workplaces across China and in MNC subsidiaries, depending on the sector, conditions may be progressively less favourable. In subsidiaries, for example, there are “‘core ingredients’ of a Chinese management system” (Smith and Zheng 2016, p. 383), such as dormitory living, individualised target setting and long hours working, that make the expatriate experience more intensive, more individualised and more isolated (Liu and Smith 2016, p. 18-21).

Dormitory accommodation has been cited as a tool of labour management in other sectors such as garment manufacture and construction (for example, Kim 2016; Fei 2020). Thus the housing of expatriate managers and workers in the same dormitory or compound has been termed “living at work”, as a labour management strategy in international context (Fei 2020). Although Siu’s (2015) work suggests that the use of the dormitory system may be changing (see Smith and Liu 2016) the findings from this research suggest it continues to prevail for expatriates in the high technology sector. The literature highlights the isolating potential of corporate control of accommodation, and this is intensified where firm bounded practices of expatriate recruitment and deployment. Boundaries are blurred between work and leisure. This may help explain why expatriates have a reputation for being more ‘compliant’ and tolerant of hardships than other workers including those inside China (Smith and Zheng 2016).

The Chinese reputation for hardship tolerance has a long and unpleasant history. In the nineteenth century, the concept of Chinese indentured worker overseas as “slavish, without individual personality or will, and pathetically oppressed” (Ngai 2021, p. xvii) was a western, racist stereotype of the Chinese coolie⁷. It is perhaps disturbing that in the twenty-first century, Chinese expatriates are again being labelled as more able than western counterparts to comply and endure oppressive working conditions (for example, Rui et al. 2017). Yet, these questions are relevant for features of Chinese national identity in relation to work and labour management (for example, Rui et al. 2017; Lee 2009; 2014; Lai et al. 2020). For example, senior managers may “construct, reinforce and reproduce a particular set of identities for employees” based on “distinctive national and organizational contexts in China” (Lai et al. 2020, p. 661). The claim is that Chinese expatriates are more willing to ‘eat bitterness’ (chi ku), as it is deemed a virtue in Chinese society (see in Lai et al. 2020; Lee 2017). The eating of bitterness might involve tolerance of, for example, undertaking regular, excessive overtime while enduring intensive working conditions, meeting high targets and accepting long term absence from family and friends.

In this context, Tang and Eom (2019 p.468-469) contend that the hard-working ethos in China should be understood from the industrial capitalism perspective. This perspective emphasises the “efficiency and productivity” of the use of time in China’s society, rather than focusing “on any static, culturally rooted devotion to work that characterises Chinese workers”. This argument is supported by Zheng and Smith (2019). They argue that understanding hardship tolerance as a source of Chinese competitive advantage is not adequate. Rather, they suggest that the hard work ethic of the Chinese worker may be a product of the “intensive competition in China” plus

⁷ The term “coolie” (苦力, kǔlì) historically referred to a labourer who performed hard physical work, often for low wages and under poor working conditions. It is now considered offensive in many contexts, particularly when used to refer to people of Asian descent, as it has been used as a racial slur in the past. It is being related to ‘eating bitterness’ 吃苦, Chīkǔ) of Chinese workers.

“coercive labour control” and “a pro-business legal framework” (Zheng and Smith 2019, p.499. see also Lee 2009; Gallagher and Dong 2011). In addition, the social and economic consequences of being out of work can be considerable.

Fierce domestic competition is therefore an important context for understanding Chinese workers’ behaviour. China’s underdeveloped social welfare system is a factor in choices open to its citizens (Yip and Hsiao 2009; Nee and Oppen 2012) and the hukou (Chinese domestic household registration) system still has considerable influence (Peng 2011). Hukou determines legal eligibilities in relation to residence (Nee and Oppen 2012, p.162-164). For example, having hukou registration in first-tiered cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, will guarantee more social benefits for a worker and their children. For example, children with a Beijing hukou would have access better schools and prestigious universities compared to students from other provinces or cities (Morgan et al. 2017, p.3). This exposes China’s inherently unequal education system (Morgan et al. 2017) and the heated competition in Chinese society that stimulates competition among workers. These conditions also help to explain what Cooke (2011, p.54) describes as the “commitment, compliance and malleability” of Chinese workers, as a consequence of strong coercive management in China, along with significant socio-economic pressures on expatriates. In Wright Mills’s terms (1951,2002, pp. 229-235), the employer brings together a collection of justifications for hard work that play in to the workers’ desire for increased levels of skill, income, status and associated power. In this the Chinese context plays an enormous role, but interpretation of such behaviours as exclusively Chinese does not seem supportable.

For example, the fact that labour disputes are recorded in Chinese workplaces, challenges the perception that Chinese workers are unconditionally culturally attuned and “willing to eat bitterness” across a working lifetime (Danford and Zhao 2012; Lee

2017; Lai et al. 2020). Social conditioning is indeed powerful⁸ but notwithstanding their illegality in Chinese law, there have been an increasing number of strikes in China (for example, Smith and Pun 2018; An et al. 2021). It was reported that the number of ‘mass incidents’ (the state’s term for strikes, protests, and riots) was about 9,000 in 1994 (see Tanner 2004). This figure had jumped to 87,000 in 2005, and surged to 127,000 in 2008 (Wedeman 2009). From 2008 to 2012, the average number of strikes per month rose from 3.6 to 32.1 (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014). These outbreaks challenge the stereotype of ‘compliant’ Chinese people, as did recent protests against strict Covid measures in China (see BBC 2022).

However, expatriate groups may be more vulnerable to control when far from home, isolated from family support and without an outlet or suitable, acceptable alternative. Smith and Zheng (2016, p. 376), for example, suggest that “[e]xpats are there because they follow Chinese firm tenets” and they do so because they depend more on the firm in foreign work locations. This level of dependency is central to the possibilities they may imagine for themselves and how they perceive their own mobility power (Smith 2016).

⁸ To reflect the author’s personal experience as a Chinese student who studied within the Chinese education system from primary school to university, I was taught *not* to challenge the authorities’ opinions/decisions, including teachers’ and textbooks’ doctrines. As a class leader (monitor) I was taught that I should put the interests of the class and my classmates before my own, otherwise I would be defined as ‘being selfish’. My personal experience resonates with the cultural explanation of harmony in China. Conflict is not encouraged and the collective interest of the group is the priority. The issue is how the collective interest is defined. From the political perspective, the Chinese government uses such a concept to legitimise one-party leadership (McGregor 2010; *The Economist* 2021) to reduce/eliminate disorder (luan) and build a ‘harmonious society’ – the Chinese version of a socialist country: socialism with Chinese characteristics.

3.5 Conclusion

In understanding the Chinese context for work and expatriation, it is necessary to appreciate the scale of diversity across China before attempting to draw conclusions about behaviours based on a single conception of national identity or even of capitalism in practice. First there is the difficulty of exactly where to position China's version of capitalism (Fligstein and Zhang 2011; Zhang and Peck 2016; Zhou et al. 2012; Xiao and Cooke 2020). Second, there is the impossibility of identifying a unified national cultural perspective in a country of China's scale and complexity (for example, Danford and Zhao 2012; Liu and Smith 2016; Zhang and Peck 2016).

Nevertheless, there are consistent ideas about the objective of stability, loyalty and a harmonious society which influence all aspects of work and employment in China, under the powerful influence of the state. The expatriate is socially conditioned by this environment and is then employed by corporations who impose their own cultural influences and expectations on their roles. Their frames of acceptance (Wright Mills, 1951, 2002, p. 229) are undoubtedly subject to such influences. This research explores their individual experiences of Chinese expatriates in the high technology telecommunications sector – a sector identified as a national champion. Chapter 4 explains the research methods and methodology employed in conducting this enquiry.

Chapter 4: Methods and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the conduct of empirical enquiry for this research project, which is an exploratory, qualitative study of Chinese workers' experiences of expatriation in subsidiaries of two leading high technology MNCs. The research questions, methods and methodological approach to the study will be explained and justified.

The chapter is divided into five main sections. It first briefly explains the research gap and questions that inform this study. The second section introduces the philosophy and interpretive approach that underpins the research and broadly considers the appropriateness of qualitative methods for inductive exploratory research. The third section of the chapter describes the features and norms of the high technology sector, providing context for this study of expatriation in the two leading Chinese high technology telecommunication MNCs. The fourth section explains how access was negotiated and justifies the methods adopted for data collection. It also explains how the data was analysed. Section five considers ethical issues, the study's limitations and the difficulties encountered in the process of research, as well as considering matters of reliability and validity.

4.2 Rationale for Research and Research Questions

As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, although the volume of research focusing on Chinese expatriation has increased, historically most studies of expatriation in the Chinese context focused on foreign expatriates working inside greater China (Zhong et al. 2015; Cooke 2009), rather than Chinese expatriates working overseas. The need for more qualitative research in the field of international human resource management in Chinese MNCs has been acknowledged for some time (Cooke et al. 2020; Cooke 2017). This research makes a contribution to that

debate. It asks the following research questions in the context of expatriation management in two giant Chinese MNCs, who are global leaders in high technology and telecommunications:

- ***How do Chinese MNCs manage their expatriates?***
 - How do Chinese MNCs recruit and select expatriates?
 - What roles do expatriates fulfil in overseas subsidiaries?
 - What does the career path of an expatriate look like?
 - What training do they have for expatriation?
- ***How do individual workers experience and respond to expatriation?***
- ***To what extent does the individual expatriate experience aid our understanding of broader principles of Chinese HRM?***

In answering these research questions, interviews were undertaken with expatriate employees of two leading Chinese MNCs over a period of two to three years. The employing firms dominate the high technology sector internationally. However, access for research was negotiated with individual expatriates themselves and did not involve their employing companies. The long-term research relationships that were developed with individual expatriates were maintained across the research period and some have continued to the time of writing.

This research examines the expatriate experience from a social relations perspective and categorises and evaluates data based on the social functions of expatriates (Zheng and Smith 2019). Zheng and Smith (2019) conducted a multi-sectoral study of much broader reach than the present research. This study is more limited in scope but the analysis and distinction between the capital and labour functions of expatriates made in the work of Zheng and Smith (2019) provides an excellent framework to organise the detail of the expatriate experience and gain insights into Chinese labour management practices.

4.3 Research Philosophy

4.3.1 *Ontology and Epistemology*

Ontology and epistemology are concerned with what constitutes reality and how knowledge of reality can be produced. Given that ontology is concerned with the “study of being”, epistemology focuses on research inquiry and how knowledge can be acquired (Saunders et al. 2012). Different ontological and epistemological assumptions indicate the different paradigms that are associated with distinctive “understandings of the nature of the world and the people in it” and “preferred methods for discovering what is true or worth knowing” in social research science (Alvesson & Deetz 2000, p.23; See this point also in Burrell and Morgan 1979). That is to say, the way in which research is undertaken is dependent upon one’s own philosophical position.

Ontology resolves

claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other (Blaikie 1993, p. 6).

Thus, objectivists argue that a single reality exists independently and external from social actors, whereas subjectivists assume reality is built or constructed by perceptions *of* social actors (Gray 2013; Saunders et al. 2012). Ontology can be deemed as a tool to distinguish between these two extreme positions in the understanding of reality. Nevertheless, May (1999) argues that it is hard to distinguish between them, as there is not a clear boundary between objectivism and subjectivism, arguing that they are part of a continuum. The “reflexive” position is a stage between these stances. Accordingly, this long-term case study adopts an inductive, exploratory, interpretivist approach as an appropriate philosophical and

methodological framework for qualitative enquiry into the experiences, values, attitudes and responses of individuals to their working environment.

4.3.2 Explanation of the Interpretivist Approach to this Research

Interpretivism requires that knowledge should be explored and obtained through the analysis of human activities, experiences, interactions and other social phenomena (Saunders et al. 2016; Yin 2014; Gillham 2010). It is in line with an inductive, exploratory approach to the study the social world context (Kuruppu et al. 2016; Yin 2014). In particular, interpretivism highlights the importance of different contexts for human activities and experiences (Saunders et al. 2016). In this respect, qualitative methods offer an appropriate means of better understanding the accounts of participants on a wide range of situations and events (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Burns 2000). Furthermore, it provides the capacity to gain an insight into a variety of unforeseen and noteworthy issues that the researcher might not know about in advance of the encounter with the research subject, but are helpful in understanding an unfamiliar situation (Bryman 2016). Thus, from the interpretivist position, the aim is to

understand the world as socially constructed through interaction where there are multiple realities and meaning is agreed upon in natural settings...you explore phenomena in the field and inductively arrive at an understanding of what is going on (Durdella 2017, p.91).

In this way it becomes possible to create new, richer understanding and interpretation of social worlds and contexts (Saunders et al. 2016) by approaching knowledge as something that highlights the understanding of how people view their worlds as socially constructed (Bryman and Bell 2015; Gray 2013; Carson et al. 2001). This approach is therefore appropriate for this research, which explores the individual experiences and attitudes of Chinese expatriates and repatriates, as well as the attitudes of senior managers.

Interpretivism also recognises that meanings can be dynamic and reshaped by social interactions in a particular environment (Kristof-Brown and Billsberry 2013). In relation to this research, individual experiences of expatriation and repatriation can vary, and therefore an interpretivist approach is suitable to explore and explain this phenomenon. Harmony, hardship, hard work and compliance with authority for the collective good are matters of wider Chinese cultural significance that have been attributed to Chinese HRM and Chinese workers. In practice, whatever these attributes actually mean in practice will be interpreted by the individual, in the case of this research that is the Chinese expatriate. However, there has been a tendency for Confucian concepts of harmony to be interpreted rather simplistically in relation to the response of Chinese workers to different aspects of labour management and control. The interpretivist approach allows the dynamics of hardship tolerance, harmony and other societal pressures to be reflected upon in depth.

4.3.3 Justification for Qualitative Enquiry and an Exploratory, Inductive Approach

To date, quantitative research methods such as the survey have dominated the study of Chinese expatriate management. This reflects a preoccupation with demonstrating statistical links between HR dimensions and firm performance or other outcomes. It has been argued that larger scale survey data can extend the generalisability of findings (Wei and Lau 2005; Selmer 2005, 2002; Björkman and Lu 2001). It is a methodological approach that dominates the Chinese HRM research field in general, especially for research that is published in US-based journals where quantitative findings are often regarded as more convincing by such publications (Kaufman 2015). This may also be the quickest route to publication and associated rewards by universities or research organisations, which is important as the Chinese government desires to establish first class universities and first class disciplines without delay (Cooke et al. 2020, p.16).

However, Cooke et al. (2020) have highlighted that quantitative research data risks being superficial and standardised, based on specific research questions that largely ignore the diverse backgrounds and the rapid, profound changes taking place within companies and organisations in China today. Hence, scholars have urged that more in-depth qualitative research should be undertaken through well-designed research questions and robust data analysis, “but without truncating the data into ‘scientific’ cubes that render the story line broken in the pursuit of ‘scientifically rigorous’ analysis” (Cooke et al. 2020, p.18). Qualitative methods allow for the examination of complex social phenomena, and enable the researcher to interact with research subjects in a way that exposes their construction of reality and the factors and viewpoints that play a part in that process.

In this research, therefore, qualitative research methods were judged to be more suitable for securing rich and in-depth information. It was not felt that quantitative enquiry could adequately capture individual experiences of workers in Chinese companies, even if using advanced statistical models (Cooke et al. 2020; Xiao and Cooke 2020; Tsui 2006). In addition, a survey was not deemed to be appropriate precisely because of the relatively limited depth of qualitative enquiry into expatriate experience in Chinese organisations to date. Qualitative methodologies are valid and necessary in exploring and understanding areas such as HRM in greater depth (Cooke 2009).

An exploratory inductive approach is also naturally linked with interpretivism (Gioia and Pitre 1990). The inductive approach typically starts with collecting data and analysing specific findings to arrive at a more general set of propositions. Inductive studies therefore focus on the illustration of multiple subjective opinions and meanings (Kovács and Spens 2007) and the generation of theories from empirical results (Saunders et al. 2012). Hence, the core point of an inductive approach is a consolidation of a substantial amount of qualitative data into a “summary format”

(Thomas 2006, p. 237) that links to the research purpose or aim. There is a movement from data to theory or generalisation.

In terms of the study of Chinese HRM, Quer et al. (2007, p.375) and Xiao and Cooke (2020) highlight that the adoption of western models or theories in studying Chinese HRM may limit their explanatory power. They suggest that researchers should have more confidence to explore and identify locally relevant research issues in order to develop theories that explain the specific phenomena under investigation in the context of China. In order to overcome the shortage of Chinese theoretical models into managerial issues, Cooke (2009, p.26) therefore argues that an *inductive* exploratory, qualitative approach is “better suited to provide an insider’s view” to explore Chinese HR issues.

The fact that qualitative enquiry in China is somewhat limited is understandable, especially since the access researchers can get to individual workers within firms is limited in many aspects. The issue of labour in China is sensitive, any labour disorders and conflicts may be deemed threats to social harmony when they appear. In the academic research field, it is usually the case that researchers can have access to a firm only when that firm is cooperating with a research faculty, and normally there will be a set of restrictions associated with data collection. For example, firms will often prefer group interviews with Company representatives present, rather than giving access to researchers to undertake individual interviews with staff.

The aim of this research was to speak to workers free of interference by their employing firm. To gain this sort of access for independent qualitative enquiry in China, *guanxi* is an essential tool. As the author of this dissertation was able to use *guanxi* to access individual expatriates, inductive qualitative research with individual expatriates became possible and desirable. It was felt most likely to reveal the micro-

detail of the experience of expatriates while also addressing a perceived methodological gap in HRM research in China.

4.4 Research Design

The research design adopted was that of a comparative case study focused on two Chinese MNCs. This research studies Chinese expatriate experiences in a specific sector, high technology telecommunications, which Zheng and Smith (2019) have identified as being exceptional for its firm-bounded approach to expatriate management. Contextualisation of qualitative research is essential (Bryman 2016). The firms provide a strong contextual frame for the experiences of expatriates. This section justifies the appropriateness of this choice for this research given its interpretative phenomenological underpinnings.

4.4.1 Case study

Given that the research objective is of an exploratory nature, this study adopts a case study approach to examine and compare expatriate management, and individual expatriates' experiences, in two Chinese high technology MNCs. This approach is especially appropriate for "how" and "why" questions relating to a contemporary phenomenon within the real-world context (Yin 2003, 2014). It also allows a deep exploration of how the market and the institutional contexts in which MNCs are embedded inform the way they operate and permit an exploration of the interaction between actors at a range of levels (Edwards et al. 2007, p. 204; see also Barratt et al. 2011).

To be consistent with the research objectives, the research questions and practical issues have a considerable impact on the choice of the case study approach. First, the philosophical approach of the interpretivist paradigm has influenced the methods used to obtain knowledge in the study, and this directly informs and shapes the choice of case study. Interpretivism requires that knowledge should be explored and

obtained through the analysis of human activities, experiences, interactions and other social phenomena (Saunders et al. 2016; Yin 2014; Gillham 2010), which is in line with the research objectives. Appropriate methods and research questions have been chosen and composed with this in mind. Second, the interpretivist paradigm is in line with an inductive approach for exploratory enquiry. The case study approach is appropriate in exploratory studies when adopted in conjunction with inductive reasoning to explore and study the social world context (Kuruppu et al. 2016; Yin 2014). In particular, interpretivism highlights the importance of different contexts for human activities and experiences (Saunders et al. 2016), and the wider cultural context is considered to be central to the analysis of expatriate experience in the present study.

In this context, case studies can reflect natural settings in organisations and offer explanations and insights into why and how social actors attach specific meanings and values to their social environment (Gioia et al. 2012; Silverman 2013; Creswell 2013). Case studies typically concentrate on an individual unit (e.g., a group, community, or event). As Eisenhardt (1989, p.534) states, case studies are focused on “understanding the dynamics present within single settings.” Additionally, case studies emphasise the significance of contextual understanding. As Yin (2014, p.16) points out,

a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon ... in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.

Empirically, the case study approach has been adopted in highly cited and well respected research in the study of HRM and IHRM in MNCs (See Zheng and Smith 2019; Lai et al. 2020; Cooke 2014; Edwards et al. 2007; Ferner et al. 2004).

In-depth qualitative case studies of organisations have been widely adopted in HRM and IHRM research (Edwards et al. 2010), as they can provide rich descriptions of

workers' experiences and opinions (Muller-Camen et al. 2008). For example, Edwards et al. (2010) use a multiple-case study approach to examine employment practices in the operations of MNCs in the UK. Unfortunately, this type of large-scale research was not possible in the present study because of the difficulty of access (this point will be further explained later). Nevertheless, comparative case studies were possible. The research focused on the cases of two highly successful Chinese high-tech MNCs, each with about a 30-year history of internationalisation. One is a state-owned enterprise and the other is privately owned. The rationale for this choice of companies is that they are both leading firms in their specific industry and represent some of the most successful MNCs in the world. The research also focused on workplace practices these firms because it was possible to gain independent access to individual workers.

The use of a comparative case study design, which involves examining two cases, strengthens the foundation for theory building (Yin 2014). By studying multiple cases, comparisons can be made to determine whether findings are replicated and consistent across different contexts (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). Through the identification of relationships that are replicated across cases, both the researcher and readers can have increased confidence in the findings (Yin 2014), resulting in more parsimonious and robust theorising, which are indicative of superior theory (Eisenhardt and Grabner 2007). Comparative case studies have already been used by Cooke et al. (2016) to identify "workers' grievances and resolution mechanisms" and explore IHRM issues in Chinese MNCs' overseas subsidiaries. The comparative case study not only develops the understanding of the research topic through cross-case analysis, but also enhances the generalisation and validity of the findings (Eisenhardt 1991).

The study of expatriate experience in these two large and high-profile firms provides an opportunity to gain insight into a sample of expatriates' whose life histories reflect the ways in which the staff of such leading firms are managed. As these firms set

standards for their sector and reflect the development of Chinese MNCs more generally, the generalisation and validity of the research can be enhanced. It should provide definitive, in-depth examples of expatriate management in Chinese MNCs. It is also proposed that the experiences of the case study firms' expatriate employees may be sufficiently well representative to allow interrogation of practices, behaviours and attitudes currently ascribed more broadly to Chinese HRM. Furthermore, studying state owned and privately owned companies may help to identify whether and to what extent the difference in ownership impacts their expatriation strategy.

4.4.2 Selecting Cases: Company A and Company B

All research participants bar one were either currently or had previously been directly employed in the subsidiaries of two leading giant firms in the high technology communications sector. Due to the sensitivity of the research relationships the names of firms have been anonymised. In China, Companies A and B lead in technological innovation and also set norms for customer service and employment standards. They are also world leaders in their field. Each company has about a 30-year history of internationalisation. One is a privately owned enterprise and the other is state-owned. At the outset of the research, the employing companies were selected as a unifying context for expatriate experience. They not only set standards for their sector but also reflect the development of Chinese MNCs more generally, providing potential for the generalisation and validity of the research to be enhanced as they are sufficiently representative to allow interrogation of practices, behaviours and attitudes currently ascribed more broadly to Chinese HRM. Furthermore, with one giant firm being state owned and the other being privately owned, it allows for examination of whether a difference in ownership may affect the experiences of expatriates.

Thus, the firms' history, governance and competitive characteristics provide important context for the experiences of the cohort of expatriates who took part in

this research. The possibility of gaining access to expatriates employed by a joint venture company was also considered. However, this possibility was rejected as it was extremely difficult to find another firm in the high-tech sector with the same scale of business in the telecommunication field as in Companies A and B. In addition, Companies A and B are the leaders in their sector, with similar intellectual property under different forms of ownership. Furthermore, a joint venture MNC could more directly involve Western influence and the objective of this research was to explore the experience of Chinese expatriates in Chinese firms. For this reason, a joint venture firm was rejected as it risked diluting the research focus on expatriates employed in MNCs embedded in 'Chinese ideology', namely, 'capitalism with socialist influence'. The history and background of the employing companies are summarised in the following sub-sections.

Company A is a young, privately-owned, knowledge-intensive Chinese MNC. It was first established in 1987. In 2017 it had approximately \$90 billion revenue (Company A 2017 Annual Report). By 2019 its business covered over 170 countries, with no fewer than 180,000 employees. Approximately 45 per cent of all its employees were working in research and design (R&D) centres. Company A has established considerable technological prowess and economic strength in its high-tech electronics and telecommunication technology field.

The company has a relatively short history of internationalisation in the global stage as it did not start its internationalising activities until the mid-to-late 1990s. It first focused on internationalisation activities in Russia, and gradually expanded to Africa and Latin America in the 2000s. In the early 2000s, it officially set up offices and subsidiaries in Europe, including UK and Germany. Although its internationalisation history is short, it is regarded as a highly successful and leading firm in China and across the globe. According to its Annual Reports over the last decade, its revenues have shown a rapid upward trend. The profits from its overseas operations have surpassed those from the Chinese domestic market

and it now has large operations in Europe, particularly in the UK, Germany and France. The corporation has a total of 10,000 employees working in Europe, and about 1,400 in the UK. Its overseas business services are not only concerned with selling products. As an example, it has also set up R&D centres in the UK.

Company B is a state-owned, communication and high-technology Chinese MNC. It was established in 1985. In 2017 its revenue reached around \$17 billion (Company B Annual Report 2017). It runs its business in over 160 countries with 75,000 employees worldwide. There are around 2,600 employees working in R&D centres and about 1,400 people in its manufacturing operations. Its business concentrates on the establishment of high technology communications and electronics, the same industrial sector as that of Company A.

In common with Company A, Company B did not begin its internationalisation until the mid-1990s. It initially expanded its business to African countries and then invested in Europe in countries such as Germany, UK, and Spain in the early 2000s. It is one of the world leaders in terms of developing and researching new industrial and communications technology and is regarded as one of the most successful Chinese state-owned MNCs.

Both Company A and Company B have been adversely affected by the trade conflict and technology disputes between China and the US. Each has also been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic that struck in December 2019 and swept across the world in the months that followed.

In summary, the two firms employing research participants are both highly successful in the same industry and each has a relatively short history of internationalisation. The choice of these two employers as the context for research into expatriates' individual experiences was deliberate, as they are Chinese MNCs which are world market leaders with different ownership structures. However, though one is privately owned, it became apparent that the Chinese state is deeply involved in each firm.

This limits the scope for comparison of the influence of ownership on governance and standards of employment, as the influence of the state is felt in each company.

4.4.3 High-tech sector features and norms – and Companies A and B

An understanding of the sectoral influences and tendencies is essential to analyse the typicality of work or practice in any sector. Fierce competition is a fundamental element of the global high technology industry. As a result, high-tech firms must invest a significant amount of money to keep pace with rapid innovation and maintain their technologies as cutting edge (Zarzewska-Bielawska 2012). For example, Apple, as a globally renowned high-tech company, invested \$21 billion in R&D in 2021 (Statista 2021) and committed \$430 billion in US investments over five years (Apple 2021). Alphabet (Google) spent \$31.56 billion on research and development in 2021, which shows an increase of \$4 billion compared to the company's R&D expenses in 2020 (Statista 2021).

In my study, Companies A and B are unquestionably in this game, as evidenced by their growing investments in R&D, which respectively invested a total of over \$20 billion and \$1.9 billion in 2021. The high-tech industry is epitomised globally by 'high pay, fast pace and high pressure'. This sectoral culture is reflected in Companies A and B, along with the Chinese high technology MNCs eagerness to reduce their reliance on foreign-country-owned technologies. They are working to develop their own high-end products in order to improve their reputation and competitiveness, particularly in light of the West's political technology blockade. In this context, Companies A and B are strongly supported by the state and have long-standing relationships with Chinese universities and vocational schools, which supply a flow of (imprintable) researchers, scientists, and graduates (Hoffman 2006). They recruit fresh graduates specialising in science and engineering from prestigious only from

'985'⁹ and '211'¹⁰ universities where the quality of graduates is guaranteed (see more about Chinese education in Morgan et al. 2017).

4.5 Negotiating Access

4.5.1 Barriers

Gaining independent access to workers in China can be a difficult task for researchers. There are routinely political, legal, and bureaucratic barriers, as well as conditions laid down by employers, which hinder access to research settings (Lofland and Anderson 2005). China is particularly challenging in this respect (Zheng and Smith 2019; Cooke 2012). This situation has been intensified by complex geopolitical issues such as the current Sino-US trade war. Now it is extremely difficult for researchers, especially doctoral students, to gain access to Chinese MNCs. In particular, the high-tech sector, which is highly sensitive, barely responds or accept any individual researcher's access request. Such difficulties are widely known and I had already encountered them during my year of pre-doctoral research training on the MSc Social Science Research Methods (SSRM) programme. As an experiment, I attended an open careers event by Company A and enquired about the possibility of gaining independent access to interview expatriates. The firm's representative gave an immediate and straightforward answer, which was 'no'. Therefore, while in-depth qualitative case studies of organisations have been widely adopted in HRM and IHRM research (Edwards et al. 2010), as they can provide rich descriptions of workers' experiences and opinions (Muller-Camen et al. 2008), this type of large-scale research was not going to be possible in the present study. In

⁹ '985 Project', also known as 'world first class university' project, it is the central government of China main target to construct first class universities in the world.

¹⁰ '211 Project' was initiated in 1995 by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, it is a project aimed at enhancing research standards of high-level universities and cultivating strategies for socio-economic development.

addition, I was told that Companies A and B generally agreed to giving a researcher access *only* if they were already collaborating with that student's research faculty.

While this was an initial setback, it became a benefit to the research in the longer term. The aim of this research was always to gain as much independent insight into individual experiences as possible. However, staff employed by Companies A and B are not encouraged to be interviewed individually without a company representative in attendance. Even where they do sometimes give access for research, the companies much prefer researchers to conduct group interviews and they also expect to have company representatives present throughout. This can be deemed a part of the corporation's control system. In a group interview, a supervisor can interrupt conversations and (re)interpret the contents of interviewees' comments at any time, which presents an enormous barrier for research that aims to encourage individual expatriates to talk about their real experiences and feelings. Such constraints could have a negative impact on the validity of research. This situation has intensified during the fierce trade war with the U.S. Interviewees later explained that their employers had strictly required them not to comment on any political news, the company's strategies or sensitive information. In this context, individual employees were likely to refuse to accept direct invitations from an unknown researcher for an individual interview. They would most likely have concerns about the motivations and reliability of the interviewer and be keen to avoid any potential trouble with their employer.

Initially, these barriers raised questions over how the type of study I wanted to undertake would be possible. I did attempt to gain some access through official approaches in the form of several emails to the HR and marketing departments in the two companies, but there was no response. When a further opportunity arose for me to meet an HR representative from one of the companies in person, the response to my request to interview some expatriates as individuals and alone, was again, an emphatic 'NO'. On reflection and discussion with my supervisor, it was agreed that

even though it might be difficult, there was far less risk and many benefits in making the study wholly separate from any corporate influence.

The first step in securing access to individual expatriates, was to return to interviewees contacted personally during my SSRM training in 2017/2018. For that project, I had used personal connections to access research participants. It is noted that gaining access to interviewees by personal contact and *guanxi* is commonly used in studies in the Chinese context (Kriz et al. 2014), and for my purposes it was essential in making it possible to continue my research. The following section explains how *guanxi* relationships enabled the study to proceed.

4.5.2 Guanxi and Research Access

As noted in Chapter 3, *guanxi* usually refers to relationships that highlight expected reciprocal social practices within a person's network of social connections (Bian 2019; Bruning et al. 2012; Chiu et al. 2009; Hwang 1987). Moreover, it carries extended meaning of power, social status and resource transmission (Bian 2019; Hackley and Dong 2001; Wang et al. 2019). The influence of *guanxi* is considered a crucial element in Chinese society and is prominent in Chinese workplaces (Warner 2011; Hackley and Dong 2001). In China, doing business is very reliant on mutual trust between the parties and is more important than legal mechanisms for conflict resolution or contract enforcement (Guo et al. 2018, p.7). Puffer et al. (2010) argue that *guanxi* is utilised as an informal system to fill the institutional voids because of the unbalanced Chinese development of institutions, especially since Chinese economic reforms and opening-up from 1978 onwards (see also Doh et al. 2017; Guo et al. 2018; Xu and Hitt 2012).

In practice, *guanxi* is deemed a facilitator for trust-based relations in business (Bian 2019; Fan 2002). Fan (2002) argues that *guanxi* is considered a part of Confucianism, highlighting the interpersonal connections and social networking that can link people together and underpin harmonious relations. Therefore, in the

context of the employment relationship, *industrial relationships guanxi* is said to be very important in Chinese workplaces (Zhu and Warner 2000). More generally, *guanxi* functions as a lubricant in Chinese society, particularly in dealing with visible and invisible conflicts between different subjects in various circumstances. Yet, some scholars, such as Tsui and Farh (1997), have argued that reference to a 'relationship' based on *guanxi* is inappropriate, as in practice the term is too complicated to define. There are, as indicated in Chapter three, in reality, many types of *guanxi* which are difficult to pin down exactly. As Bian (2018, p.597) argues,

guanxi is a five-level variable, and that the nature and forms of *guanxi* influence are contingent upon whether *guanxi* is a tie of connectivity, a sentimental tie, a sentiment-derived instrumental tie, an instrumental-particular tie, or an obligational tie that facilitates power and money exchanges.

The dynamics indicate the complexity of *guanxi*. As a Chinese national I approached this research project as someone who is familiar with the complicated and nuanced nature of *guanxi* in work and social life. I was therefore aware of the different levels and types of *guanxi* which might help me to gain access and establish trust relationships with participants in this study.

During my SSRM studies in 2017, I had made contact with eight interviewees. I knew none of them personally, but was put in contact with them by a member of my extended family, who knew all the interviewees socially and also knew some as former work colleagues or associates. In this scenario, the first level of *guanxi* was established between me and my family relative, then this extended to research participants introduced to me. My first stage of access was therefore through 'family *guanxi*' (*jiaren guanxi*). As my relative also knew some of the interviewees as trusted colleagues, there was an element of personal, business or professional *guanxi*, which is understood as *shuren guanxi*. As a result of the combined influence of *jiaren guanxi* and *shuren guanxi*, I gained my first stage of access. Later, as my own

relationships with interviewees strengthened and improved, some of the participants introduced their colleagues to me, in a process akin to the snowball sampling approach (Kriz et al. 2014; see also in Lee and Lings 2008; Punch 2006). This led to me having a total sample of 27 research participants by 2022. The process of accessing and establishing respondents through my personal/family tie of *guanxi*, and maintaining and developing my *guanxi* with the respondents reflects the dynamics of *guanxi* (Bian 2018; 2019). Throughout the extended duration of engagement with these respondents, certain individuals (such as A3, A5, B1, B2) have evolved into close friends with whom I share candid discussions spanning a wide array of subjects, encompassing work-related matters, political discourse, and personal topics.

Throughout the years of my research study, I made a deliberate and conscious effort to maintain *guanxi* with all research participants. Due to the constraints of Covid, I was unable to travel to meet with them as I had planned. I therefore communicated with them mainly through Wechat, a Chinese multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment application. The ways I maintained and deepened my connection and *guanxi* across the years of research included sending messages to research participants at times of Chinese traditional festivals, such as Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival. In return, as our trust relations deepened, in addition introducing me to potential new research participants, they sometimes shared with me a variety of news items related to Chinese or international politics or their firms' development.

An example of how the mutual trust relations worked is that when one research participant's (B1) son was planning to go abroad to pursue a masters' degree in Economics and Finance, he consulted me. I provided some information from several UK university websites and shared my experiences of living in the UK with them. Not all *guanxi* relationships with participants became as close as this example, but I worked hard on my personal relationships to develop them from a *shuren guanxi*

(shallow trust) to a *xinren* (deep trust), which enhance the quality of the research process and gave me access to rich data (see Kriz et al. 2014). The trusting *guanxi* (relationship) is significant as interviewees can talk with much less mental stress during interviews, which can improve the validity of the research (see Kriz et al. 2014). This example shows the dynamics or the different levels of *guanxi* categorised by Bian (2018, 2019), *guanxi* plays as a “sentimental tie” that facilitate “favour exchange” (see also Bian 2005). The relationship with B1 has deepened significantly through multiple rounds of communication, encompassing interviews and daily chats. These interactions have fortified our mutual trust, evolving from a one-sided Q&A format for research purposes into a reciprocal exchange. In essence, we have shared resources to fulfil each other's needs, while there is no “Money-for-power-influence exchange” (Bian 2018, p.616) between us. I am acutely aware of the significance of *guanxi* with my respondents, as it directly impacts the availability of crucial resources, including multiple in-depth interviews and extended engagement. Consequently, I have conscientiously nurtured my *guanxi* with the respondents and proactively inquired if there were any ways I could assist them in return. The *guanxi*-related ethical concerns will be explained in the Ethical Consideration section.

In summary, *guanxi* has played a significant role in gaining access in this study. The first level of *guanxi* I used was my family *guanxi* (*jiaren guanxi*) – that is my own relationship with my relatives to gain a foothold in the research process. Then because of the *shuren guanxi* between my relative and some of the interviewees, I gained access to expatriates as individual research participants. Once in contact with the participants I consciously sought to establish and maintained *xinren guanxi* with as many of them as possible. These different forms of *guanxi* are established by different principles of social interaction and treatment, which leads to varying degrees of relational interdependence (Guan and Frenkel 2019). A good *guanxi* between participants and the researcher exerts a positive impact on establishment of

a harmonious relationship, building trust and openness in the interview situation. Guanxi can exist in other societies but it is very much emphasised in the Chinese context. It is unlikely that the researcher would have gained access to individual expatriates without guanxi.

4.5.3 The Research Participants

The type of sample chosen in conducting interpretivist research matters greatly, since they influence the conclusions and generalisability of the research. In this research, claims to generalisability will be made with great care and many caveats, but the chosen sample reflects the relevant characteristics of graduate recruits to Companies A and B and therefore relate to the wider group to be generalised (Williams 2000; Mason 1996).

While initial access relied on guanxi, the sample was purposive, in that participants had either direct expatriate experience or had managed expatriates. A total of twenty-six respondents were interviewed across Companies A and B, plus one additional self-employed business partner. In this total there were twenty expatriates and repatriates and most of them were Chinese graduates, four senior managers from headquarters, and further two locally born, ethnic Chinese employees in European subsidiaries. The research participants performed a range of occupations, such as HR managers, technical line managers who managed technical operations and employees, and technical operational employees in overseas subsidiaries. The majority of respondents (thirteen) are still conducting their expatriation assignments, while six have returned to China.

When interviewing respondents, the research began with their life histories and experiences of expatriation and repatriation. This was the main focus of enquiry with all interviewees. However, each of the four respondents who were now part of senior management, had been working in the case companies for more than eight years and they not only understood the history of their employers but also had insight into

future planning. These senior staff could not only share their personal experiences as expatriates but could also provide a deeper understanding of corporate strategy in relation to expatriate management. Detailed information on respondents employed at Company A may be seen in Table 4.1; Table 4.2 shows the information on respondents from Company B.

The relationships (*guanxi*) between myself and the respondents remained strong throughout the study, albeit with varying degrees of closeness. The duration of each of these relationships is presented in Table 4.1 and 4.2. Notably, I have known eight of them (A1, A2, A3, A6, A11, B1, B2, B3) since 2017 when I conducted my SSRM study. Among these eight respondents, I share a closer bond with A2, A3, A11, B1, and B2, and we regularly engage in both formal and informal conversations via WeChat. A3, in particular, can be considered a 'super informant' as he consistently shared his expatriation experiences and updates about his employing company (A). This may be attributed to A3's extensive expatriation experiences in relatively developing areas, in West Africa, which generated more interest than others, combined with our shared high school background. The connection between us was notably strong. Another example of a close relationship is respondent B1, whose son was planning to study abroad and asked me to help by providing him with relevant information. The long-term relationships with these respondents enabled me to obtain detailed and up-to-date information for this study.

The remaining respondents were recruited through a snowballing approach, with contact initiated in late 2019 using WeChat or WhatsApp. Most of the initial interviews took place during the COVID-19 period in 2020-2022. As planned, I conducted repeated interviews or discussions with each respondent to gather as much information as possible. For instance, A4, A5, and B3 expressed a keen interest in sharing their experiences regarding work and life in overseas subsidiaries, occasionally reaching out to request further conversations.

Interviews or conversations with the respondents varied in duration, lasting anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes for short interactions over specific news items, to longer sessions lasting 1 to 3 hours. The quality of these interviews was deemed good, as they provided comprehensive information addressing my research questions. One of the strengths of the use of technology for research interaction lies in the ability it provided for frequent follow up conversations with respondents for additional information. I frequently contacted them via text messages to seek clarifications and explanations on specific details. While some respondents did not always respond promptly, the majority would reply to me as soon as they had the time. There were some cases where on occasions there was no response, such as A14 and B9. Also, there were some cases where informants were reluctant to share sensitive about their firms or their own personal information. In such cases, I engaged with other respondents where my relationship was deeper, such as A3 and B1, to gather the necessary information. The conversations with all respondents primarily took place between 2020 and 2022. They happened when they had the time to speak with me, which meant there was an irregular frequency. For "super informants" like A3 and B1, I engaged with them multiple times, while with "new" respondents such as A13, A15, and B9, I conducted only about five additional discussions after the initial round of formal interviews.

To maintain the *guanxi* with all twenty-seven respondents, I consistently reached out to them during traditional Chinese festivals, including the Spring Festival, to convey my wishes for good health, wealth and luck. Those who maintained frequent interaction and contact undoubtedly aided my understanding of their expatriation progress, and their rich information significantly influenced my thinking and analysis. It was essential for me to preserve the original meaning of their statements and accurately report the findings. I am aware that the way I presented and analysed the findings was influenced by the respondents with whom I interacted more frequently.

Table 4.1 Respondents Employed at Company A

Expatriate/ employee	Job title	Age	Gender	Date of commencement with Company A	Date of first expatriate assignment	Length of relationship with the researcher
A1	HR manager	43	Male	2008	2015	2017-2023
A2	Junior expatriate	27	Female	2016	2016	2017-2023
A3	Project manager	38	Male	2012	2013	2017-2023
A4	Executive manager	40	Male	2008	2017	2020-2023
A5	Junior expatriate	24	Female	2019	2019	2020-2023
A6	Senior engineer	38	Male	2013	2015	2017-2023
A7	Senior manager (HQ)	47	Male	2007	Not Expatriated	2020-2023
A8	Senior engineer	42	Male	2012	2013	2020-2023
A9	Junior expatriate	27	Male	2018	2019	2020-2023
A10	Senior engineer	39	Male	2012	2014	2020-2023
A11	General staff (HQ)	35	Female	2010	Not Expatriated	2017-2023
A12	Formal senior manager (HQ)	45	Male	2008 but resigned in 2017	Not known	2020-2023

Expatriate/ employee	Job title	Age	Gender	Date of commencement with Company A	Date of first expatriate assignment	Length of relationship with the researcher
A13	Junior local employee. Ethnic Chinese born in Europe	26	Male	2020	Not an Expatriate	2021-2023
A14	Senior local employee. Ethnic Chinese born in Europe	39	Female	2010	Not an Expatriate	2021-2023
A15	Senior manager	35	male	2012	2017	2021-2023
A16(Business partner)	Manager	29	Female	Self Employed, but with extensive experience of Company A	Not applicable	2021-2023

Table 4.2 Respondents Employed at Company B

Expatriate/ employee	Job title	Age	Gender	Date of commencement with Company B	Date of first expatriate assignment	Length of relationship with the researcher
B1	Executive	55	Male	2008	2013	2017-2023
B2	Executive	56	Male	2008	2011	2017-2023
B3	Senior engineer	35	Male	2011	2014	2017-2023
B4	Senior engineer	37	Male	2014	2015	2020-2023
B5	Senior manager (HQ)	48	Male	2006	Not Expatriated	2020-2023
B6	Senior engineer	42	Male	2008	2010	2020-2023
B7	Senior manager	37	Male	2013	2016	2020-2023
B8	Senior manager	53	Male	2003	2010	2020-2023
B9	Junior expatriate	30	Male	2018	2019	2020-2023
B10	Junior expatriate	29	Male	2016	2018	2021-2023
B11	Senior manager	53	Male	1996	1999	2020-2023

4.6 Research Methods

The choice of qualitative methods is shaped by the interpretivist paradigm. The interview is the main method of primary research, supplemented with secondary data and documentary review to triangulate data wherever possible (Yin 2014; Decrop 2004). These diverse data sources provide a variety of perspectives, which enhance the validity of the research (Yin 2014).

4.6.1 Interviews

Interviews are a widely used method “to access people’s experiences and their inner perceptions, attitudes, and feelings of reality” (Zhang and Wildemuth 2017, p.239), which accord with the main aim of the research, that is, to investigate expatriates’ experiences of their own personal expatriation life-cycle. Life-histories provide a detailed, closeup or meticulous view of individual motivations and context and this can enhance understanding and the potential for generalisation (see also Znaniecki 1934).

All interviews were conducted online mainly during Covid time, 2020-2022. The benefits of online interviewing methods include increased accessibility, convenience, cost-effectiveness, flexibility, participant comfort, accurate recordkeeping, capturing non-verbal cues, and efficient data management. To be more specific, online interviews provide convenience for researchers and participants by eliminating the requirement for physical travel, which saves time and resources and complied with Covid restrictions. Thus, interviews could be conducted from the comfort of their respective locations with minimal risk. Additionally, online interviews offer scheduling flexibility, allowing them to be arranged at mutually convenient times for all parties involved.

The online medium for interviewing was enforced by Covid restrictions but it did not appear to present a barrier to establishing rapport with research participants. It was,

in fact, a great benefit, as online sessions allowed me to adapt myself and be flexible in line with respondents' working patterns (Bell et al. 2022, p.450-453). The flexibility of online interviews allowed to have repeated conversations and interactions with the respondents, which is a strength of the study. These advantages make online interviewing an attractive option for researchers seeking to gather high-quality data while maximising resources and overcoming geographical constraints, which suits perfectly of the current research.

An unstructured interview format was used in all cases, with the exception of the four respondents in more senior positions at company headquarters (HQs) in China. In these cases a more semi-structured format was adopted. For reasons of confidentiality, all interviews are anonymised and the study does not reveal which subsidiary individual expatriates are working in.

The interview is a well-established method in qualitative research, as it provides for a high density of data and is "a powerful tool for eliciting rich data on people's views, attitudes and the meanings that underpin their lives and behaviours" (Gray 2004, p.213). Additionally, other sources were utilised to cross-check interview data and achieve triangulation and enhance the validity and reliability of the interview findings. This involved using secondary data, such as official and publicly available website material as well as relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, to cross-check with data generated from interviews (see Silverman 2013).

4.6.2 The Unstructured Interview

Unstructured interviews were adopted in interviewing expatriates and repatriates. As to a large extent knowledge is lacking about Chinese expatriates' individual experiences (Cooke 2019; Rui et al. 2017), unstructured interviewing allows the researcher to let conversations range so that issues about expatriates' life cycles are fully captured. The primary focus of unstructured interviews is to understand a situation from the interviewee's perspective and in conducting them the interviewer

should be governed by the cultural convention of the research settings (Fife 2005). This requires the researcher to understand the interviewees' language and meanings in the particular cultural context of the research (Fife 2005). In this research study the researcher and all interviewees were Chinese speakers, and all but one interview was conducted in Mandarin. The remaining one was conducted in Cantonese as the respondent felt more comfortable using that language.

The unstructured interview is also interchangeably called the conversational interview, in-depth interview, non-standardised interview and ethnographic interview (Zhang and Wildemuth 2017). The technique was developed in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, to investigate and understand people's social realities. Minichiello et al. (1990) and Patton (2002b) stressed that unstructured interviews rely on social interaction between the interviewer and the participant, predetermining neither the question nor the answer. Similarly, Punch (1998) argued that unstructured interviews can access to understand the complex nature of people's behaviour without imposing any prior categorisation.

In their research, Lai (2016) used an ethnographic approach to gather data from daily conversations with fellow MNC employees. Data generated from daily conversation with colleagues is akin to an unstructured interview approach. Lai's (2016) research involved a three month period of work at a subsidiary. It would have been ideal to undertake the same ethnographic elements in the research design for this study. However, participant observation would not have been allowed by the firm and covert observation would not have been possible without raising serious ethical issues of risk for the researcher and respondents. Nevertheless the contact and interviews took place over a period of 2 to 3 years (in some cases longer) and rich information was obtained. This approach also allowed for the return to areas of discussion and the checking of data. Because my access to them did not involve their employer, interviewees appeared to be relaxed about how they expressed their attitudes and feelings. They shared their personal experiences and commented on

sensitive political news as well as controversial management strategies related to their firms. This openness is one of the strengths of the present study.

The interviews began without pre-defined interview questions, with a focus on the respondent's life history. As the interview progressed, questions were generated in response to what the respondent raised or revealed raise. Consequently, patterns of data generated from each unstructured interview may be different. The main value of this unstructured approach is to uncover unanticipated information, which facilitates understanding of interviewees' social reality from their own perspectives.

This said, the unstructured interview is not random or nondirective, even though predefined questions are not used. As Patton (2002a) Researchers cannot start to use unstructured interviews without detailed preparation (Fontana & Frey 2005, see also in Zhang and Wildemuth 2017, p. 242). It is essential for the researcher to clarify the purpose of the interview and the general scope of the issues that need to be discussed, if they are to achieve deep and insightful information from interviewees (Fife 2005). Therefore, during interviews I used a loose guide of lightly structured questions (see Appendix 2), as a flexible and open-ended aide-memoire (Briggs 2000; Burgess 1984). In addition to acting as a prompt to me in my questioning, it also facilitated consistency across different interview sessions (Zhang and Wildemuth 2017). Some interviewees were actually very excited to have the chance to share their stories and repeated themselves during interviews. The aide memoir prevented me from getting too caught up in their stories to ensure all salient issues had been covered in the end.

However, as the interviewer, I took care to avoid "asking questions that impose interpretations on the situation" (Patton 2002, p. 343). I adopted the role of a "learner" about interviewees' perspectives (Zhang and Wildemuth 2017) but was careful not to give advice or judge (Denzin 1989). For example, when talking about some sensitive news related to their employing companies, instead of saying 'I think',

I said 'xxx newspaper says' and then asked what they thought about that story. Some conversations were more challenging to manage compassionately, especially because we were not sitting face to face where body language and facial expressions would have been helpful in showing empathy for personal, difficult and emotional stories about their expatriation assignments. In such situations, I sometimes briefly shared my experience of studying in the UK by myself, which resonated with them. This was a good way to build mutual trust *guanxi*, which allowed me to obtain richer data.

The control and adjustment of the conversation was one of the main challenges. While the depth of the research relied to some extent on personal reflections, and good rapport with interviewees is essential to that sort of sharing, it was important not to become so involved with the informants' stories that the research focus was lost (Fontana and Frey 2005). An unstructured interview should always be "a controlled conversation, which is geared to the interviewer's research interests" (Minichiello et al. 1990, p. 30). It was therefore important to maintain the focus on the research concerns, while responding positively to new issues and topics that the interviewees raised (Zhang and Wildemuth 2017). I felt I achieved this goal because all research concerns/topics were covered during interviews with every respondent. In addition, I managed to maintain a good *guanxi* with all of these interviewees, as evidenced by the fact that they have been engaging with my additional questions right up to point this thesis was completed.

The design of the research was very beneficial to the data. I found that multiple interviews with the same participants improved their speed of engagement with the conversation, and with each interview they appeared more relaxed than the first time we had met. For example, respondent B2 came online for one of our later interviews sitting on their sofa with a cup of tea, and asked me in a very relaxed tone "what else would you like to know about my expatriation experience?" I attempted to make the interview environment relaxed and comfortable for all my interviewees, although I did

ask some tough questions (such as about family issues). I took brief notes during the interviews and once the interviewee was comfortable with the process, I asked if I could use recording equipment to capture the data, so as to be able to maintain good eye contact throughout the interviews. Most of the respondents agreed to be recorded during the interview process but four of them did not feel comfortable about it. In these cases, in order to build mutual trust *guanxi*, I took brief notes during the interviews and later recorded myself reflecting on the interviews. It was rewarding to see that my respondents felt able to talk through their personal feelings and some even showed me some pictures of their lives in overseas subsidiaries and of their families.

I usually began my interviews with usual greetings and then commenced with very open questions such as, “how did you become an expatriate” or “can you please tell me your experience of becoming an expatriate”. They generally ended with a similarly open question, such as, “...are there any areas we haven’t discussed that you feel are important and I should have asked you about”. Rich data emerged from these interviews and some interviewees expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Several new and unexpected themes and issues arose. For example, interviewees spoke of the social impact for them as repatriates in their repatriation phase – an area which has been largely neglected in the existing literature (see Zhu et al. 2018).

In the existing literature, many researchers have adopted interviews as a method to collect data from the Chinese expatriate community (for example, Cooke 2014; Rui 2017; Zheng and Smith 2019). However, few have specifically identified what kind of interview they used and typically researchers look at one perspective or one phase of the expatriation period, whereas this study is looking at the expatriates’ whole life cycle, from recruitment to repatriation. The findings provide biographies of expatriates and their assignments from selection through to repatriation – and in some cases reassignment to a new expatriate position.

In summary, the unstructured interview allowed deep insight into expatriate experience in a particular context (see Zhang and Wildemuth 2017). Additionally, the method is appropriate for an interpretive research paradigm and an exploratory study of this nature.

4.6.3 Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews were adopted when interviewing senior managers in the case companies' HQs. The purpose of these interviews was two-fold. First, these senior managers had insights into expatriates and expatriation to share, and second, they could impart information on company HR policies for expatriates, including recruitment and selection approaches, training and repatriation career plans. Compared with expatriates and repatriates, interviews with the senior managers were somewhat different, as there was a known set of information required as a broad framework for the interaction. For example, their insights on corporate recruitment and selection approaches and training processes were important. Therefore, while their life history was relevant, their organisational knowledge was also needed. In this respect, semi-structured interviews were more appropriate for collecting data from senior managers who were under time pressures. This said, the interview was allowed to range if the interviewee so wished. I therefore allowed the narrative to develop and followed it on many occasions. With the specific research aim, semi-structured interviews were useful and appropriate for these participants. A basic guiding structure was used to follow questions and specific areas of interest during the interview (Bryman 2004; Symon and Cassell 2012).

Interview questions (which can be seen at Appendix 3) were formulated. Overly specific questions were avoided in favour of an approach that could build rapport between interviewer and interviewee and encourage a more relaxed – rather than interrogative – atmosphere (Bryman 2012, 2016). This method enabled me to acquire detailed information about how the companies treat their expatriates and

allowed for open questions and enquiry (see Rubin and Rubin 2012). Interviewee responses supported depth of understanding of processes and internal politics which could not have been achieved by the use of survey or more structured interviews with a list of pre-established questions in a fixed order with standardised wording. The effect of a highly structured approach is “essentially the same as personally administered surveys” (Luo and Wildemuth 2017, p.249) and this was not desirable. Semi-structured interviews have more flexibility.

The benefit of interviewing senior managers was considerable. Different categories of informants can provide information from various perspectives, which enables triangulation of data. All semi-structured interviews were carried out individually by telephone or facetime, complemented with text messages via Wechat in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese). Each interview lasted between 45 to 120 minutes.

4.6.4 Documentary Evidence

In addition to interviews, documentary evidence was reviewed. Company documentation was made available by senior managers, thereby allowing interview data to be complemented by detailed review of company policy documents and procedures. In addition, review of published secondary data was undertaken. Where appropriate, official government publications and statistics and media reports were used to supplement data gained from expatriates and management in MNCs. Where possible, triangulation of data was attempted.

Documentary review has its historical place in the intellectual tradition of interpretative social science (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The main concern about documentary evidence is its potential bias. There is potential in all such documentation for false reporting and distortion, even in official sources. However, all types of data have similar issues of potential bias and distortion, as they are generated and produced socially. Data generated from documents may be different from accounts given in interviews, and provide a source of comparison (Smith and

Elger 2014). Documents can also provide an alternative historical insight, always bearing in mind that ‘there is no “original” or “true” meaning of a text outside specific historical contexts’ and they “have to be understood in the contexts of their conditions of production and reading” (Hodder 2003, p.156). Through reading relevant documents, I was able to obtain historical insight into Companies A and B and their HR policies, always remembering that no data, whether documentary evidence or not, should be treated as perfectly neutral presentation of reality (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995).

4.6.5 Data collection process

The first phase of the data collection was collecting secondary data (documentary review). This phase began when I was undergoing my research training, conducted in 2017-2018, and continued until 2022. The detailed backgrounds of the two employing MNCs were examined to justify the selection of them as a control for the selection of expatriates. Materials also included the MNCs’ annual reports, news, and advertisements. The review of these materials allowed the author to have insightful information into what image the companies were trying to present to the public.

In addition, academic literature on Chinese MNCs and expatriation was reviewed to understand their business activities. The study I undertook during my social science research training identified some important issues of expatriation in Chinese MNCs, and threw up more questions which motivated the author to investigate this area further. Data collection continued throughout the research period, as changes in the macro-environment have impacted the Chinese MNCs’ businesses in a major way, and it is therefore important to keep abreast of the latest news.

I was supposed to meet the first interviewee in person on either 21st or 22nd January 2020 in China to begin face to face fieldwork before the Chinese New Year.

However, the meeting had to be postponed, due to the unanticipated Coronavirus

outbreak in China. At the time, that interviewee expected to be reassigned to South Africa some time around March 2020. He had not been assigned to work overseas since he returned from his first expatriation assignment to South Africa in 2013. However, his new assignment did not take place once Covid hit, and I finally used Wechat video chat to talk to him on 14th March 2020. This is an example of the Covid disruption that affected the whole period of research.

After the first few months of the pandemic, it was an easy decision to move to online interviews by phone (Bell et al. 2022, p.450-453). The main data collection period was from May 2020 until June 2022, however, contact with my initial group of interviewees had been established prior to May 2020 and contact with some interviewees has continued past June 2022. During this period, I sometimes interviewed some of the respondents in either early morning or late at night to accommodate the time differences around the world. I seized every opportunity to interview respondents as they were extremely busy. I also continued to seek out more participants through my personal guanxi throughout the research period. As a result of some 'last minute' recruits, small number of interviewees ¹¹ were interviewed repeatedly over a period of around four to six months rather than two to three years.

The relatively small sample of participants is a limitation in the research but repeated interviews with the majority of respondents gave depth and detail to the data. This long-term relation method allowed time for deep trust relations to evolve. For example, respondent A3 was passionate about posting his personal work and life photos on the Chinese social media WeChat Moment. Because he trusted me, he did not block my access to these pictures of his vivid working and social life. If I found something interesting or anything relevant to expatriation, work, attitudes towards some political news and so on, I would either comment on the post privately

¹¹ Respondents A13, A14, A15 and A16

or message him in private chat to discuss things. This is an example of the ongoing communication between me and my respondents, which generated rich data.

4.6.6 Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used in this research. Blaxter et al. (1996, p.185) state that

“analysis is about the search for an explanation and understanding, in the course of which concepts and themes are likely to be advanced and considered and developed.”

Data analysis can be broken down into three sub-processes: data reduction; data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles and Huberman 1994). In the process of analysing qualitative data, data reduction needs to be accomplished by coding and classification. Coding is the analytical act of reducing, rearranging, and integrating acquired data in order to generate theory. It enables conclusions to be drawn that answer research questions through explanations, patterns, and linkages identified as themes within the data (Miles and Huberman 1994; Sekaran and Bougie 2013). However, the process is not linear as the final step can feed back into coding.

Thematic analysis is a comprehensive and flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes in data (Braun and Clarke 2006). It elevates data analysis beyond simply description of explicit themes to deeper interpretation considering underlying ideas and assumptions (Braun and Clarke 2006), which was in line with the study’s interpretative phenomenological underpinnings. I used the thematic approach and the analysing framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87) – shown in Table 4.3 – to analyse my data. I found it useful as each phase was clear and guided me to deal with my rich data.

Table 4.3 Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, as a framework for stages in this research.

Phase	Description of process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

The first involved listening, translating and transcribing recordings to identify any interesting patterns and puzzles and assess whether the acquired data might relate to a “basis of common sense, official accounts, or previous theory” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, p.210). Moreover, it was to identify whether any inconsistencies or contradictions appeared among the views of different groups of individuals and people’s attitudes towards what they do.

The reading and transcribing process was sometimes like another round of interviewing. When some points were identified as unclear and needed to be further explained, the researcher contacted the participants for clarification. Indeed, in the process of 'chatting', more issues, stories and views that respondents wanted to share with the researcher emerged. I allowed this to happen as there was no need to stop them sharing new information and the interaction cemented social bonds. The first phase of data analysis laid a solid foundation for the second step, which was coding.

The data was coded manually without using any data analysis software. A thematic coding technique was adopted to generate categories through seeking for key events and instances in the interview transcripts and documents. Three main phases of expatriates' life were used as a framework: pre-departure, expatriation and repatriation.

The use of comparative thematic coding is to identify core events which represent the categories and also to look for new categories. Drawing on the transcripts and relevant documents that followed the expatriation life-cycle (pre-expatriation, expatriation and repatriation), data was coded and ordered into several categories within that life-cycle. However, since the coding process was ongoing throughout the research period, some categories were reviewed and were combined or developed into sub-categories. The process of coding and finding initial themes to organise the data underpinned the next step, of memo-making.

Memo-making is a step between coding and writing a draft which is commonly used in ethnographic study (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). It involves writing preliminary, partial and correctable memos as an 'on-going process of analysing and writing', to reduce 'writer's block and increase fluidity and depth' (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001, p.167). In the memo writing process, some short paragraphs were written based on the coding concepts under the drafted themes. For instance, short pieces of writing

about staffing global policy and expatriate life cycle were composed, to ensure that the coding was closely connected to the research questions. Although this phase of memo-writing was fairly descriptive, it helped me to illustrate explicit stories in terms of Chinese expatriates' experiences. It also provided a solid foundation for the production of a more lengthy report of findings which further categorised themes and developed linkages with theories around expatriate management and Chinese HRM.

4.7 Ethical considerations and limitations

According to Emmerich (2016, p.2), the ethics of research bring the moral standards into scientific study and encompass the morality that individuals undertaking research must abide by (Thomas and Hodges 2010; Yin 2014). As such, the overwhelming priority for any researcher is to protect any participants from potential harm (Bryman 2016).

In this study, the employing firms are commercially sensitive high technology companies who do not permit their employees to speak to researchers alone. To protect all concerned, the names of these companies are anonymised. Additionally, no information was shared between research participants and all respondents' personal information is protected and anonymised.

Regarding Cardiff University's ethics code of practice, the ethical approval form was submitted to the administration office for approval (Appendix 4). Additionally, the consent form (Appendix 5 and 6) was issued to all participants to ensure interviewees understood the research context, objectives and so on (Yin 2014; Saunders et al. 2012).

I was also aware of the ethics of using *guanxi* in this study. First of all, there was no material or pecuniary exchange in the whole process of the research. I did not pay any monies to participants for further access to their colleagues, internal documents or other sensitive information. Some interviewees, such as A7 and B2, voluntarily introduced their colleagues to me to help me complete the research and strict

confidentiality was maintained between the interview data of each participant. All data I obtained was from through the interviews over time. Thus, all pictures (which will be seen in Chapters 5-7) in the dissertation were shared with me by the research participants. Some interviewees, such as A3 and B1, said they would like to meet me for a meal when they return to China as they were interested in my work and wanted to see me in person. I have agreed, as in the Chinese context, having dinner together is similar to having coffee in the UK. However, Covid restrictions mean that no meals have taken place at the time of writing.

Second, using guanxi to access the respondents was the only option available to me to contact people. There truly was no alternative, especially during the very challenging Trade-war and Covid period. The use of guanxi through my family ties allowed me to start the research process, but nevertheless my family member worked in neither of the employing companies nor did they have any business contact with them. The use of guanxi exerted a positive impact on this study. Without the use of guanxi, it would not have been possible to complete this research.

4.8 Limitations and difficulties encountered

One of the limitations of the research is the relatively small sample of respondents. Yet the barriers to access for the sort of independent research completed for this study are very high. Arguably, having 27 in-depth sets of repeated interviews to analyse is a relatively good result. Interviewees are very difficult to access in the highly sensitive high technology sector, and this became especially difficult during the trade war between China and the US. It would have been ideal to be able to interview more respondents, and to have in the sample not only expatriates recruited in China but also Chinese domestic employees and Chinese expatriates recruited overseas, but it was simply not possible to do this during covid restrictions and the trade war. This research is designed a long-term, in-depth qualitative research, the repeated online interviews with the respondents provided rich data for this research.

The other limitation of the method is that the author was not able to observe respondents' at work and in life in person during the data collection period. Due to the coronavirus outbreak, the face-to-face interview schedule had to be postponed. Although some participants were not in China, they were still feeling uncomfortable and insecure about having an interview during this tough period of time. The researcher was also unable to undertake face to face interviews or travel during Covid restrictions. All expatriates in the study have experience in expatriation in different areas of the world, including Asia, Africa, Europe and UK. It was impossible to visit them, but online interviews provided a good alternative in the circumstances.

The trade war between China and the US directly restricted the access to more participants. As briefly mentioned, the battle between these two superpowers severely hampered the development of the Chinese high-tech industry, which heavily depends on semiconductor chips. Since the restriction of the supply of core technology components, the global supply chain balance was broken, and therefore many Chinese high technology firms must strive to survive. As the two leading high-tech MNCs in the sector, Company A and B have been in a fight for survival. This affected the availability of interviewees who were working around the clock. In addition, they were more nervous as Company A explicitly forbade all employees to accept any types of interviews, and they were told not to comment on anything.

Moreover, while the snowball effect was useful, it also had some limitations. Some were worried about giving me names because individual respondents did not want to expose the fact that they participated in the research. In this respect, it is understandable that not all of them would introduce their colleagues to the author.

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 the discussion moves on to introduce the expatriates in more detail and present the findings.

Chapter 5: Becoming an Expatriate

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents empirical data to illuminate how individuals become expatriates and Chinese MNCs manage their entry into employment and expatriation. The experiences of individual respondents are used to understand how expatriates are recruited and selected by Companies A and B. The chapter is divided into two main sections, beginning with personal profiles of the research respondents. The second section of the chapter explains the recruitment and selection of expatriates. It also provides additional context for Chapter 6, where empirical data on the training and orientation of expatriates is presented.

5.2 Profiles of Research Respondents

In Chapter 4, basic information on all interviewees was presented to briefly introduce the sample of research respondents. In this chapter, additional detail is presented to fully represent each respondent's life history as an expatriate. As Companies A and B have different approaches to recruitment and selection related to their respective status as private sector and state-owned enterprises, the material on respondents is presented under the heading of their employing company.

5.2.1 Respondents Employed at Company A

Table 5.1 shows detailed profiles of each expatriate respondent from Company A, including their expatriation history. There were fifteen respondents from Company A, but while they are numbered A1-A15, not all were expatriates. In the sample of fifteen, there were in fact ten expatriates at the time the research was being conducted. Their ages ranged from 24 to 43 years. They occupied positions in various departments, including HR, engineering and sales. Only two (A2 and A5) of the ten expatriates were female.

Five of the respondents (A1, A4, A5, A6, A8) had been firm-assigned expatriates, while the rest (A2, A3, A9, A10, A15) could be understood as self-initiated expatriates. This did not mean that self-initiated individuals had necessarily applied for *specific* positions overseas – rather, they had applied for employment with Company A in the firm knowledge that they would be required to work outside China. Although they knew they would be assigned to work overseas, they were not able to choose specific locations. In that sense, there was a high level of control of expatriation by the firm even where expatriation was not wholly firm-assigned.

Four of the Company A expatriates (A1, A4, A5, A9) still occupied their first overseas assignment at the time of this research. Of the remainder, another three (A6, A8, A15) had completed at least one expatriate assignment before being transferred to further expatriate positions in other countries. Expatriation assignments varied, but these respondents had been working outside China for periods of time ranging from 2-5 years. A further two (A3 and A10) had been repatriated back to China. Of all the expatriates in this sample, only one (A2), had resigned during the period of expatriation. A2 was an exceptional case as she was fluent in the language of her host country and had lived there as a student before working for Company A. When she resigned, it was to join a new employer in the same host country.

Table 5.1 Profiles of expatriate respondents employed by Company A

Expatriate	Job title	Age	Gender	Relationship and family status	Year of commencement with Company A	Year of first expatriate assignment	Firm Assigned or Voluntary Application	Location and Duration of First Expatriate Assignment	Subsequent Expatriate Assignments, including periods of Repatriation to China where applicable.
A1	HR manager (Managerial role)	43	Male	Partnership no children	2008	2015	Firm Assigned	UK 5 years	First assignment ongoing to date
A2	Junior expatriate (Operational role)	27	Female	Single no children	2016	2016	Application	Germany 3 years	None. Resigned in 2019 to join company in host country
A3	Project manager (Operational and managerial roles)	38	Male	Partnership 2 children	2012	2013	Self-initiated to be an expat, but firm assigned in each location	Egypt 6 months	Ethiopia 1.5 years Mali 2 years Egypt 1 year Repatriation to China 2018 to date
A4	Executive manager (Managerial role)	40	Male	Partnership 2 children	2008	2017	Firm assigned	Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates 3 years	First assignment ongoing to date
A5	Junior expatriate (Operational role)	24	Female	Single	2019	2019	Firm assigned	Kenya 3 months	First assignment ongoing to date
A6	Senior engineer (Operational and managerial roles)	38	Male	Partnership	2013	2015	Firm assigned	Nigeria 3 years	Repatriation to China in 2018 for 3 months New expatriation to Germany to date

Expatriate	Job title	Age	Gender	Relationship and family status	Year of commencement with Company A	Year of first expatriate assignment	Firm Assigned or Voluntary Application	Location and Duration of First Expatriate Assignment	Subsequent Expatriate Assignments, including periods of Repatriation to China where applicable.
A8	Senior engineer (Operational and managerial roles)	42	Male	Partnership 1 child	2012	2013	Firm assigned	South Africa 3 years	Kenya 2 years South Africa to date
A9	Junior expatriate (Operational role)	27	Male	Single	2018	2019	Self-initiated to be an expat, but firm assigned in each location	South Africa	First assignment ongoing to date
A10	Senior engineer (Operational and managerial roles)	39	Male	Partnership	2012	2014	Self-initiated to be an expat, but firm assigned in each location	Brazil 5 years	Repatriation to China 2019 to date
A15	Senior manager	35	Male	Single	2012	2017	Self-initiated to be an expat, but firm assigned to exact location	Norway 2 years	Norway 2 years Poland since 2020 to date

In addition to the employees currently working as expatriates for Company A, the life histories of five additional respondents are shown in Table 5.2. Each of these respondents had insights to offer on expatriation, even though they were not themselves expatriates at the time of the study.

Respondents A7, A11, and A12 each worked in the Company HQ in China but were not expatriates at the time of this research. It should be noted that Respondent A12 resigned from the company in 2017 and shared their experiences in this context.

Two further respondents, A13 and A14, were ethnic-Chinese born outside China. Respondent A13 was a British born Chinese and A14 was a European born Chinese. They worked in subsidiaries as locally born Chinese employees, and therefore do not qualify as expatriates.

Respondent A16 was an additional interviewee who had at one time worked with Company A as a consultant business partner. Once again, they had no direct experience of being an employee or expatriate at Company A, but had insights to offer based on their experience of working alongside the company.

Table 5.2 Non-Expatriate Interviewees at Company A

Respondent	Job title	Age	Gender	Relationship and family status	Date of commencement with Company A
A7	Senior manager (HQ)	47	Male	Partnership 1 child	2007
A11	General staff (HQ)	35	Female	Partnership with two children	2010
A12	Formal senior manager (HQ)	45	Male	Single	2008 but resigned in 2017
A13	Junior host country employee in Europe	26	Male	Single	2020
A14	Senior host country employee in Europe	39	Female	Partnership	2010
A16	Manager	29	Female	Single	–

5.2.2 Respondents Employed at Company B

A further eleven respondents were secured at Company B. Table 5.3 shows detailed profiles of each of these respondents, as well as their expatriation history. The age range of respondents employed by Company B were from 29 to 56. As was the case for respondents from Company A, they worked across various departments and job titles, but the majority of them were engineers, and all were male.

All respondents from Company B were firm assigned expatriates. Interviews revealed that they had had very little influence over being assigned or the location of their assignments. It was usual practice for them to be briefly consulted by their senior managers and then they were required to agree to their posting. Four of the respondents (B4, B7, B9, B10), were still engaged on their first overseas assignment at the time this research was undertaken.

Respondent (B6) completed his first expatriate assignment in 2011 but was immediately re-assigned for a further two year posting and was then given another two year assignment, with no return to China in between assignments. He was repatriated to China in 2015 and has been there ever since then. Four interviewees (B1, B6, B8 and B11) had been repatriated and remained in China after completing expatriate assignments over periods ranging from 5 to 10 years. A further two (B2 and B3) were repatriated to China for a short time after their first assignments were completed and then dispatched overseas again.

Respondent B5 is a senior manager in the Company B HQ. He did not have expatriation experience but he was very familiar with the recruitment and selection approach of the company.

Company B

Table 5.3 Profiles of Respondents employed by Company B

Expatriate	Job title	Age	Gender	Relationship and family status	Date of commencement with Company B	Year of first expatriate assignment	Firm Assigned or Voluntary Application	Location and Duration of First Expatriate Assignment	Subsequent Expatriate Assignments including periods of Repatriation to China where applicable.
B1	Executive (Managerial role)	55	Male	Partnership 1 child	2008	2013	Firm Assigned	Pakistan 3 years	UK 2 years Repatriation to China in 2018 to date
B2	Executive (Managerial role)	56	Male	Partnership 1 child	2008	2011	Firm assigned	South Africa 6 years	Repatriation to China in 2016 New expatriation to South Africa from 2019 to date
B3	Senior engineer (Operational and managerial roles)	35	Male	Partnership 1 child	2011	2014	Firm assigned	India 2 months	Repatriation to China for 5 months New expatriation to South Africa from 2015 to date

Expatriate	Job title	Age	Gender	Relationship and family status	Date of commencement with Company B	Year of first expatriate assignment	Firm Assigned or Voluntary Application	Location and Duration of First Expatriate Assignment	Subsequent Expatriate Assignments including periods of Repatriation to China where applicable.
B4	Senior engineer (Operational and managerial roles)	37	Male	Partnership	2014	2015	Firm assigned	UK 5 years	First assignment ongoing to date
B5	Senior manager (HQ)	48	Male	Partnership	2006	Nah	Nah	Nah	Nah
B6	Senior engineer (Operational and managerial roles)	42	Male	Partnership 1 child	2008	2010	Firm assigned	Sudan 1 year	Kenya 2 years Ethiopia 2 years Repatriation to China from 2015 to date
B7	Senior manager (Operational and managerial roles)	37	Male	Partnership 1 child	2013	2016	Firm assigned	UK 4 years	First assignment ongoing to date
B8	Senior manager (Operational and managerial roles)	53	Male	Partnership 1 child	2003	2010	Firm assigned	South Africa 10 years	Repatriation to China from 2020 to date
B9	Junior expatriate (Operational role)	30	Male	Partnership	2018	2019	Firm assigned	South Africa 1 year	First assignment ongoing to date

Expatriate	Job title	Age	Gender	Relationship and family status	Date of commencement with Company B	Year of first expatriate assignment	Firm Assigned or Voluntary Application	Location and Duration of First Expatriate Assignment	Subsequent Expatriate Assignments including periods of Repatriation to China where applicable.
B10	Junior expatriate (Operational role)	29	Male	Single	2016	2018	Firm assigned	Nigeria 2 years	First assignment ongoing to date
B11	Senior manager (Operational and managerial roles)	53	Male	Partnership, 1 child	1996	1999	Firm assigned	Pakistan 2 years	Iran 4 years Repatriation to China from 2005 to date.

Although there were some similarities in the processes of recruitment and selection for all research respondents, there were also marked differences in detail between practices in privately owned Company A and the state-owned enterprise, Company B. While Company A did allow its existing employees to volunteer for expatriation, it relied *mainly* on a graduate recruitment programme for its more junior levels of operational, technical expatriates. In practice, all new graduates applying for employment with Company A were aware they might be asked to undertake an expatriate assignment. In contrast, Company B did not have a bespoke expatriate recruitment programme and was far less likely to assign a newly recruited employee overseas. Rather, it selected established, trusted employees from the ranks of its employees in China to become expatriates. The details of the recruitment and selection practices for both companies are explained fully in the following section.

5.3 Processes of Recruitment and Selection for Expatriate Assignments

5.3.1 Similarities Between Recruitment Strategies in Companies A and B

Both companies A and B recruited all new employees from the top band of Chinese universities, especially those specialising in maths, engineering, and communication engineering. Quite apart from the technical disciplines, when interviewed, senior managers from both companies said that candidates from a specific group of prestigious universities are targeted for their new graduate recruits. This is because it is expected that the standard of the university is taken as an indicator of the quality of new employees and a predictor of whether they are likely to be ‘self-disciplined’. As interviewee A7 explained,

our company has long term cooperation [guanxi¹²] with a couple of top Chinese universities and we have spring and autumn recruitment fairs, and we normally recruit new people from there. We also received thousands of applications from other Chinese universities but we only select those who graduated from ‘985’ or ‘211’¹³ universities. One important thing is that these graduates are more likely to

¹² The *guanxi* refers to the establishment of relationships and cooperation between the firm and these Chinese universities.

¹³ The “211 Project” was launched in 1995 by the Chinese government, with the goal of supporting and improving the quality of 100 Chinese universities in order to create a group of world-class institutions. The “985 Project” was launched in 1998, with the goal of building a smaller group of elite

be able to accept the corporate culture and they are disciplined. I mean they appreciate that they got the offer because it is not easy to find a decent job in China ... and they can accept and adapt to our culture faster through training and work experience ... almost everyone more or less knows our culture [that is] work hard and strive (WHS)!

A7 Senior manager, Company A, HQ

Work Hard and Strive (WHS) is a comprehensive cultural initiative used to cultivate a particular set of attitudes – in particular self-discipline and commitment to excellence – to work inside Company A. The initiative has a well-known Chinese name, but in this dissertation pseudonym ‘WHS’ will be used in order to protect the anonymity of Company A and the respondents it employed. It is significant that qualities of self-discipline are seen as essential for employment – not only in Company A but also Company B. While Company B does not have the same WHS instrument, interviewee B5 confirmed that it too relies on certain universities as an indicator of the qualities they value in new recruits. A full discussion of WHS and of the approach of Company B as ideational influencers is undertaken in Chapter 7, where expatriates’ ideas and attitudes towards their roles and their work are explored in greater detail.

we recruit graduates from the first-class Chinese universities and colleges. Besides their academic records, we look for those who have experience working in Student Union or other university organisations as they would know the importance of discipline in an organisation and how to work with others.

B5, Senior manager, Company B, HQ

A second preference expressed by senior managers in both companies was that they preferred to recruit graduates from less wealthy family backgrounds or those from less developed regions. It was not designed into the sample, but the majority of participants in this study were from small rural villages. For example, respondents A3 and B2 were from a eastern village in the southwest where the local people primarily

universities within the 211 Project universities. “211 or 985” universities are considered to be among the best universities in China, and they typically receive more resources and support from the government compared to other universities.

relied on agriculture. To be more specific, A3 was born in a small village in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and he has four siblings.

The level of development and population structure in each Chinese province and city varies greatly, and for the masses of people who live in villages and more rural areas, finding a 'decent' job in a big firm is the main goal. China's National Bureau of Statistics (2021), reports that although urbanization has been developing rapidly in China, with the rate of urban population up to about 60% of the total population of 1.4 billion, the number of rural dwellers and those engaged in farming is still very high. As rural migrants enter cities, the majority people who arrive may lack higher education and social resources such as *guanxi* (Day 2013). This means they may be restricted to being able to apply for relatively lower-skilled jobs and lower levels of the social hierarchy (Yip and Hsiao 2009; Day 2013; Wang 2020). The only way for the children of rural migrants¹⁴ to raise their class status is to receive a high mark in the Colleague Entrance Examination and be able to access higher education. To find a decent job, workers have to demonstrate their strong capabilities, such as a certificate from a prestigious university, working experience, and *guanxi*. This prepares the ground for dependency on the firm and the corporate preference for such recruitment was confirmed by respondent A16,

Company A prefers to recruit graduates from poor and rural areas ... [I know it is so] ... because I was sitting next to them at the school recruitment fair and chatting with the recruiting staff. I think the reason they prefer candidates from such backgrounds is that they are more easily managed, I mean 'brainwashed', frankly speaking ...

Several respondents (for example, A3, A7 and B3) were originally from a relatively poor region of China. They reported that they studied very hard in the high-school because they realised that a good result in the College Entrance Examination is a stepping-stone to success. In their cases, having higher education and working in a renowned company had allowed them to succeed in obtaining Guangzhou and Shenzhen hukou – a hukou in a developed city. As well-known, leading high technology MNCs, which pay relatively well in China Companies A and B are

¹⁴ As is the case for the majority of Chinese people.

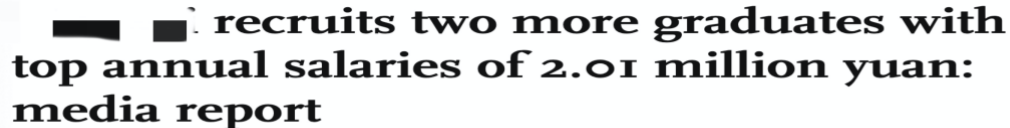
attractive employers for candidates with such a background. A question that cannot be answered by this study but might be worthy of further investigation is whether recruits from poorer or rural backgrounds are also perceived by the firm as being able to tolerate more hardship.

5.3.2 Differences Between Recruitment Strategies in Companies A and B

5.3.2.1 Company A

As a private company, Company A not only recruits from Chinese domestic universities, but also recruits its Chinese employees from ethnic Chinese already studying overseas. Company B did not do this. Company A offered Chinese nationals studying in China or overseas very attractive monetary incentives to join them. For instance, in one example, media reports claimed that Company A offered two Chinese graduates, who were deemed 'young genius', annual salary of up to two million RMB (approximately 227,272 GBP) in 2019 for its talent development project. This was a piece of news that quickly became one of the hottest topics on Chinese social media, as can be seen in the screenshot of one headline¹⁵. The Company name is redacted to preserve its anonymity. In general, the size of the benefits package was particularly salient in Company A, for example, as it offered a monthly salary of about RMB 9,000 (£720) for degree graduates in 2018, and about RMB 11,000 (£900) for master's graduates. This was well above the market rate at the time, when the average monthly salary for Chinese university graduates was RMB 5,429 (£603) (source: *China Daily* 2018).

In another distinctive feature of Company A's processes, while all candidates are evaluated against the same selection criteria, a proportion of new recruits are immediately allocated to a fast track 'expatriate group'. Those assigned to this group are told right away that they will be assigned to work overseas. It seems that having



■■■ recruits two more graduates with top annual salaries of 2.01 million yuan: media report

15 By Global Times

studied abroad is a strong indicator for an expatriate assignment. As interviewee A5 explained,

I received my master's degree from an American university. When I was recruited into the company, I was allocated to the expatriate group. The majority of our new staff [who studied overseas] are more or less the same.

A5, Female Expatriate, Company A

Interviewees explained that generally, Company A uses a four-stage selection process. First, in an initial interview an HR manager looks at the candidate's CV and asks them questions related to their professional skills. The second phase of selection is personality and psychological testing, where candidates complete multiple choice test papers to evaluate their suitability for Company A's cultural and working environment. The third element of selection is a test to evaluate English language ability. Such stages in recruitment were also confirmed in the study by Li, Zhao and Han (2020). In the fourth phase there is a final round interview by high-ranking staff at Company A. Respondents described the last phase as particularly challenging and highly pressurised. For example, interviewee A5 recalled their interviewer beginning by saying,

your CV was just very ordinary, and I don't see any outstanding records. I don't think you are the one we want.

A5 went on to recall,

I was totally shocked and I felt frozen there for like, I don't know, maybe 2 minutes before I started to say something!

Other Company A participants in this research also had similar experiences, where their capability was seriously questioned or directly criticised. They appeared to share a common view of the best way to respond, which was that as long as you remained calm and did not panic, but rather showed your passion, modesty and confidence, then you would pass. As respondent A2 said, "I managed to keep myself calm although I was very nervous, and I just communicated with them during the interview."

Interviewees also said the chance of being appointed could be lost by an applicant to Company A, if they answered 'no' to the question of whether they were prepared to work outside China. All applicants for employment were required to fill in an extra application form which asked "are you willing to work overseas?" The unspoken rule, not openly expressed to candidates by Company A, but which all respondents to this research said was widely understood, was that failure to tick the box to reply 'yes', would probably result in elimination even if they had passed all other tests. As A7, a senior manager at Company A explained,

our business spreads all over the world, so we need everyone to be ready to go overseas ... so for those who are not willing to work overseas, we normally don't take him/her into account unless this person is absolutely extraordinary in a specific area [...] we receive thousands of applications every year, and we also send thousands of our staff to work overseas, so we don't worry about the loss of some potential employees.

A7 Senior Manager, HQ

In addition to the new graduates who are channelled into expatriation, Company A also allowed longer serving employees to initiate their own expatriation. They had to express their desire to be an expatriate to the head of their department. Interviewee A3 explained,

Our company always has 'overseas orientation', encouraging staff to go overseas because we have many subsidiaries globally. We can also make a report to our head in the section to express the will to work abroad [...] In the career promotion process, experience of working overseas is one of the requirements.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director

It followed that although the majority of expatriates had been firm assigned, there was a smaller number of respondents from Company A who were genuinely self-initiated expatriates from within the ranks of the company (for example, A3 and A9).

The general selection criteria for new employees, such as educational background, being self-disciplined, having a good individual attitude and proven technical and professional skills, were also applied to employees who volunteered for expatriation. There were some additional criteria which appeared to make applicants attractive as

a prospective expatriate, including having had international working experience, and possessing good communication skills, including language ability (see Shen and Edwards 2004). Respondents A7 and A3 had each been expatriates and also understood the processes of selection for expatriation respectively,

... well, we do assess the individual pre-expatriates' performance records, which directly show their capability, experience and other necessary criteria ... for new employees, we encourage them to gain experience by working overseas as long as their English ability is okay ... most employees in our company understand our hardworking culture so they knew that they were going to work in a different environment, maybe in a harsh developing area.

A7, Senior manager, HQ

Now we need to take TOEFL¹⁶ before going overseas. Only when you receive a minimum mark then you would have qualification to go abroad ... I mean stay there for long term, you need to settle down there ... I had the TOEIC BRIDGE exam. Now [this may be] TOEFL or IELTS, I am not sure ... or you have to pass an internal English test in the company ... that includes a computer test, writing test and spoken English ... now they use external organisations' qualifications.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director

For expatriates in senior managerial positions in Company A, selection was focused more on managerial ability and working experience as well as language ability. As interviewee A4 stated,

I was in the executive level when I was working in China and I have been working in Company A for more than 10 years, so the company valued my working experience...like my annual assessment records, and the number of successful projects I was involved or I led... [for that reason] they would like me to work in this subsidiary. [...] I had experience as a regional manager in Shandong province before expatriation, and my business record was very good. I managed to lead my team [to] win many important network projects there and obtain many enterprises

¹⁶ Test of English as a Foreign Language is a standardised test to measure the English language ability of non-native speakers wishing to enroll in English-speaking universities.

customers. Well, I mean that my working capability has been proved by making profit for the company.

A4, Expatriate, Executive

In summary, Company A applies the same basic selection criteria to all new graduate recruits. Some of these could expect to be fast tracked as part of an expatriate group or later assigned as expatriates. All applicants were expected to be *prepared* to be assigned overseas, but it was at the discretion of the Company and not all were.¹⁷ Where applicants are recruited for fast tracking into expatriate assignments, specific skills appear to be targeted for selection. For example, those who have studied overseas and have good language ability are more likely to be seen as good potential expatriate recruits. The Company also allows existing employees the chance to volunteer for an expatriate assignment. However, in all cases – no matter which recruitment pathway new expatriates come from – the individuals cannot choose the location for their expatriation. The only exception would be where an applicant applied specifically for a vacant post advertised in a particular subsidiary.

‘[...] no, we cannot choose the location. The company will allocate it for us. I don’t mind this to be honest, because it’s fair to everyone. Our company’s business is dominant in developing countries and that is where the majority of us are dispatched to.’

A4, Expatriate, Executive

In this respect, nine out of the ten respondents from Company A who were expatriates had been assigned their expatriation location by the firm. The single exception, A2, was a direct applicant for a vacancy in a German subsidiary. She was ethnic Chinese, born in China, but already working in Germany when she made her application to Company A. Thus, while there are some opportunities for voluntary expatriation, the trend to firm-assigned expatriation is very strong in Company A, especially for senior managerial levels.

¹⁷ It was not possible to verify exactly what proportion were or were not assigned overseas.

5.3.2.2 *Company B*

In Company B, just as in Company A, there were four rounds of tests and interviews in the general selection process for new recruits. First, there was a professional ability test. The second phase was a personality and psychological test very similar to that administered in Company A. In the third phase, professional interviewers posed problem-based scenarios and asked questions related to candidates' professional knowledge, experience and competency, challenging them to provide practical solutions to address the issues raised. The final round of assessment and evaluation was an interview to assess English language ability and another round of questions related to professional skills. Respondents B3, B4, B7 and B9 confirmed that they were asked whether they would be agreeable to being assigned to work overseas for a couple of years. However, Company B did not explicitly ask the question of *all* potential new recruits, nor did they create a fast-track or distinct 'expatriate group', as was done in Company A.

Company B, as a state-owned firm, could not offer similar monthly rates, but it provided a good set of comparable benefits, such as health insurance, hukou (registered residence, which brings benefits associated with citizenship), and housing provident fund. Also, in both companies, salary increased based on the length of employment, standards of performance, seniority, and additional expatriation subsidies. For new graduates, especially those from the countryside or rural villages in China, being appointed to a job in such prestigious companies held the potential to greatly improve their parents' life and make them financially independent as individuals. As a state-owned company, Company B is part of the Chinese national system, and followed a different approach when selecting expatriates. The national system encompasses the country's governance structures. It can be broadly defined as including anyone who is permanently employed within state owned entities. Recruitment of employees into Company B means they are part of the national system and this is the first step towards any form of work assignment.

After employment at Company B, expatriates are selected from within the ranks of those who are already confirmed as employees. This applies to new graduates as well as more senior level managerial staffs. Technically, as a state-owned enterprise, Company B has the capacity to recruit and select candidates working anywhere in

the national system. Workers in state owned enterprises, especially executive level employees, can be moved between assignments and even between different state-owned enterprises at the will of the employer or the state. If someone is to be promoted to a high-level managerial position, their own personal archives (as well as those of their immediate family) will be reviewed and investigated. Being a leader (senior manager) in the state-system means taking the responsibility of corporate governance for the sake of the Party – at some stage these individuals may even become key politicians in state departments (Lin and Milhaupt 2013). In this way, the management system in the state-owned sector is intertwined closely with politics – a specific and important element of the Chinese context for work. This means expatriates in Company B have very limited scope to refuse an expatriate assignment, and this applies especially to executive level employees. Interviewee B1, who was a very senior manager, explained the system,

those who are working for any state-owned organisations are deemed as working within the national system (体制内), and they are regarded as an asset of the nation. By contrary, those who do not work for state-owned organisations are regarded as working out of the national system (体制外). Our company predominantly recruits candidates within the system [...] We employees in this system can be moved to any other SOEs.

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, HQ

In the interview notes of this conversation in Mandarin, the nature of what being an ‘asset’ is made clearer than in my English translation. B1’s point is that managers in high positions in the national system are elites within China and are therefore to be managed by the will of the country (as their employer) as well. Therefore, when seeking people suitable for expatriation, recruitment information is mainly spread *within* the company to managers who are tasked with selecting potential expatriates. The HR manager stated,

when we need to recruit candidates to work overseas, we inform some relevant departments inside the company to see if they can recommend some candidates.

B5, Expatriate HR Manager, HQ

Respondents explained that those employees who have personal connections with trusted managers were most likely to be selected for higher ranking expatriation assignments (see also Zheng and Smith 2019; Shen 2006). It was notable that respondents to this research did not use the word *guanxi* when explaining personal relations in this scenario. They referred explicitly to 'trusted relations'. In fact, the executive level positions in Company B were directly appointed from the *Organization Department of the Communist Party of China* (组织部) (CPC) which has an enormous amount of control over personnel within China. It is indispensable to the CPC's power, and the key to its hold over personnel throughout every level of government and industry (News of the CPC, 2010). As the vice president of Company B said,

... I am one of the members working within the system. I remember that I received a phone call from the CEO one morning in 2012 and he asked me to have a meeting in the executive meeting room. As I walked in the room, there were 3 people sitting with the CEO. My boss introduced that they were from the Organisation Department of CPC and they would like to send me to work in a British subsidiary as a vice president. However, they never asked whether I want to go or not. You know, working this system, we don't have many choices. If I said no, unless I have some serious illness, I would probably not have any chance to get promoted and I may be treated as a 'disloyal' employee. If that were the case, I will be game over in this company!

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, HQ

For expatriation at the executive level, the most important criterion is the individual's political orientation – loyalty to the Party (Makarchev et al. 2022). Their working experience, managerial ability and language ability come second.

they asked how many years I have become a member of the Party, and what was my opinion about its development. One question was very interesting, 'have you ever thought about withdrawing from the Party?' I said, 'of course not'. These kinds of content of conversation lasted around an hour. I thought the most important criterion is the right political orientation, the loyalty to the Communist Party, then they explained why they decided to talk to me.

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, HQ

This is not the same for middle and low managerial and technical expatriates in Company B, who are selected first for their professional skills, individual attitude, working experience, education and language ability. At these more operational, technical levels, Company B respondents described selection criteria that sounded very similar to Company A. However, unlike the small number of self-initiated expatriates at Company A, it would appear that no Company B employees have a choice in whether they apply for expatriate postings. Senior engineer B6 stated,

... they thought of me as an experienced engineer because I have been working in this industry for 10 years and I was working in Sudan and South Africa years ago. They explained how important this project was ... they asked if I was willing to accept this international assignment etc. ... I was a bit hesitating because of my family, but they did not ask anything related to [how] my family [would cope] ... I feel that they did not really want to know whether I want to go or not ... it was more like an asking procedure [performance]. Well, I just had to accept it.

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

At lower ranks of Company B there was less explicit reference to CCP membership. However, with the exception of interviewee B10, who is a probationary CCP member, the remaining research participants from Company B were all full Party members. As B1 explained,

the middle managerial positions have to be a member of the Party [CCP], as there are some projects and documents related to both home and host countries' national security issues ... so only Party members can have access to them.

B1, Vice President, Company B, HQ

In Table 5.4, the criteria for selection in both firms is summarised.

Table 5.4 Recruitment and selection in Company A and B.

Company	Recruitment Pool	Selection criteria for Different Types of Expatriate		
		<i>Executive</i>	<i>Managerial</i>	<i>Operational</i>
Company A	All new recruits are aware that expatriation is possible during their careers. Existing employees also have the chance to self-initiate and apply	Work experience	Being disciplined	Being disciplined
		Personal trust Hardworking	Hardworking Work experience	Hardworking Professional / technical skills
Company B	Internal recruitment within the company and within the national system	Individual attitude Language skills	Individual attitude Language skills	Educational background Individual attitude
		Loyalty to the Party Personal trust Working experience Managerial ability Language ability	Being disciplined Working experience Language skills Individual attitude	Being disciplined Professional skills Educational background Individual attitude

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the profiles of research respondents in greater detail. It has also explained the recruitment and selection of respondents. In both companies, becoming an expatriate demands that they meet standardised criteria for employment which apply whether the individual is assigned inside or outside China's borders. The recruitment and selection criteria for expatriates are mostly the same in both companies. Expatriation may include only limited choice on the part of the individual in Company A, but even less in Company B, and in both companies individuals appear to have little choice over the location for their overseas assignment. Chapter 6 will present data on the training expatriates receive for their assignments, and the roles they are prepared for.

Chapter 6: Embedding Ideas, Values and Attitudes

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5 the technicalities of the recruitment and selection of expatriates were outlined. While Company A is a private sector MNC and Company B is state owned, the fact that they are in both in the telecommunications sector and Company A is a national champion, means both companies are very much integrated with the values and economic goals of the Chinese government. There is therefore a similar approach to selecting new recruits according to criteria which prioritise individual qualities of self-discipline, hard-work and compliance, and trustworthiness. This approach highlights the importance of corporate expectations of expatriate attitudes and behaviours. The focus on self-discipline also raises questions over exactly what roles expatriates are being trained to fulfil in subsidiaries.

In presenting findings on these issues, the chapter is divided into three main sections. The first main section of this chapter identifies corporate values and considers how they overlap with national goals and are cultivated in expatriates in Companies A and B. It also considers how the overlap between national goals and corporate values are reflected in the search for individual qualities of self-discipline and trust in employees. The second main section of the chapter moves on to consider the training provided for expatriation and the degree to which there is preparation of expatriates with integration into the customs and cultures of their host countries. The third and final section of this chapter considers the split between operational and capital roles expatriate respondents perform[ed] in their subsidiaries.

6.2 The Self Disciplined, Trusted Expatriate

In both companies, managers spoke of the need for all employees to possess qualities of self-discipline and the potential for hard work. This section begins by looking at findings from Company A, where its status as a private sector firm and a national champion, produces a particular cultural environment where corporate and national goals are aligned. It moves on to considering state-owned Company B, where membership of the CCP is common and in practice is associated to some degree with conditions of employment. Senior managers or executives in the state-

owned Company also fulfil a political role representing the Party to govern the organisation.

At Company A, a scheme encouraging employees to resign was approved in 2007. A total of over 7,000 employees with more than 8 years of service will need to gradually go through the process of "*resigning first and then competing for positions.*" As per the company's requirements, employees with 8 years of service need to submit a resignation application to the company. After reaching a 'voluntary' resignation agreement, they can then compete for new positions and sign a new labour contract with the company, with their job roles remaining largely unchanged and a slight increase in compensation. Upon resigning, these long-term employees, who have some of the oldest employee numbers in the company, will also see their employee numbers disappear. This signifies the cancellation of the hierarchical employee number system to some extent. All employee numbers will be reorganised and reordered, without indicating the length of employees' service. Company A is known as the pride of the nation and has always instilled a sense of crisis in its employees through various means, namely, to keep their employees feeling hungry. In its aggressive corporate culture, there is no room for those who are lazy; the company is not only tough on its competitors but also tough on itself.

This 8-year contract policy has significant impacts on both the company and its employees. The policy fosters a sense of retention and loyalty among employees, encouraging long-term commitment to the organisation's goals. With job stability for the duration of the contract, employees have the opportunity to develop valuable skills and gain extensive experience over time. The company can also benefit from better succession planning and talent management, ensuring continuity in key positions. However, the 8-year contract may pose challenges for career progression and mobility, as employees might feel constrained in seeking new opportunities outside of the company. It could also impact work-life balance, as fulfilling contractual obligations might prioritise work commitments over personal life. Employee satisfaction with the policy can vary, depending on individual preferences and career aspirations. Additionally, Company A needs to consider the policy's implications on attrition rates and organisational adaptability in a dynamic market environment.

At Company A, there was a very strong focus on employee dedication to keeping the customer satisfied. One means of cultivating and embedding this ethos in workers was an internal Company A 'contract' which, in the interests of anonymity and for the purposes of this research, will be called the '*Work Hard and Strive Agreement*' (*WHS Agreement*). The *WHS* agreement is an individual commitment to corporate values and the '*WHS way of working*' is a form of commitment that can be entered in to by invitation only. The invitation is made by a senior manager and is restricted to those who have worked in Company A for at least two years and have excellent performance records. It is held up as a goal to aim for, and refusal of the invitation can hardly be contemplated. Once signed the *WHS* agreement becomes a contract with concrete terms.

The *WHS* agreement has no official format or prescribed content, and employees of Company A normally write their own *WHS* agreements manually, for themselves. That said, there are well-known expectations of what each individual's agreement should contain. Interviewees (for example, A3, A4, A7) explained that the agreement represents a "commitment to work very hard", to engage in "unpaid overtime working" and to "be brave to deal with any unforeseen difficulties". Therefore, a typical *WHS* agreement would involve the individual employee expressing their strong desire to forego payment for overtime working as well as entitlements to annual paid holiday. Once having been invited and then created and signed such an agreement, the individual becomes a '*Work Hard and Strive Person*' (*WHSP*) in Company A.

Although this is technically a voluntary arrangement and an invitation that individuals are free to refuse, being a *WHSP* is deemed such an honour that refusal would cause considerable disquiet and would most likely involve a loss of *guanxi* with superiors. Several interviewees said it would be difficult to refuse to commit to the contract if invited to do so. Senior manager A7 said, "no one would expect any employees to refuse to sign it". Interviewees explained that if an employee refused to sign the contract, they would probably lose some of their the *guanxi* with the superior. As respondent A15 said,

if I did not agree to sign the contract to be a WHSP, my superior would definitely think I am a lazy person and not ready to work in the company. Almost everyone I know in the company are WHS employees.

Similarly, interviewee A8 said,

I want to have a good guanxi with my superior, and being a WHSP shows my will to commit to work ...

Moreover, acceptance of the invitation makes the individual distinct from those who are either not invited to become WHSPs or do not choose to sign the contract. Those who are not WHSPs remain classified as 'ordinary employees'. In return for the WHS commitment, Company A provides a higher salary and bigger company stock share allocation than it does for ordinary employees. It also carries various other benefits, such as performance evaluation linked to performance related bonuses.

Company A is extremely security conscious and due to the need to preserve the anonymity of respondents it was not deemed wise to utilise a live example of one of their personal WHS Agreements. Once signed, the original agreements are held by the Company and reproducing a copy could mean that the respondent's anonymity would be compromised. However, an online search for an example of a WHS Agreement uncovered a sample document. It was not written by any respondents to this research, but when the example document was shown to interviewees they confirmed that the content was more or less the same as their own. A copy of the hand-written sample document follows, along with an English translation of its contents.

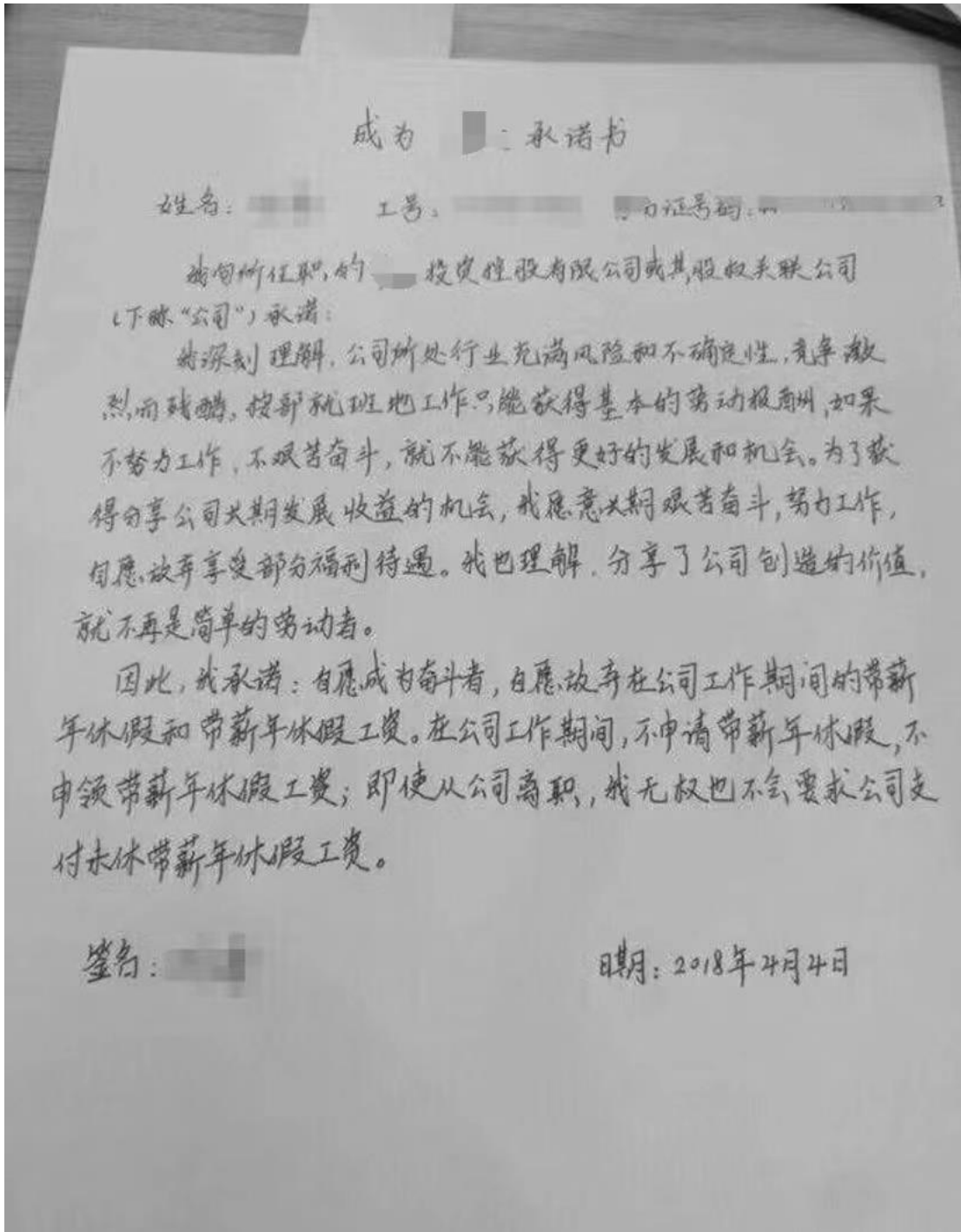


Figure 6.1 A Copy of the WHS Agreement Document

The Sample WHS Agreement – English Translation

Name:XXX Employee ID:XXX Citizen ID: XXXXX

I am committing to Company A and its equity related subsidiary corporations (hereafter Company A):

I understand that Company A is part of an industry which is full of risks and uncertainty, and the competition is extremely fierce. If I just work as other ordinary people, step by step, I will only have the basic salary. If I do not work hard, not WHS, I will not have a better career and will not benefit from development or promotion. In order to share in benefits from the long-term development of the company, I am willing to be a WHSP for the long term. I will work hard, strive for good performance and I am willing to give up on overtime pay. I also understand that I will no longer be just an ordinary worker when I share the company's values and aspirations.

Hence, I am committing to the fact that I am willing to be a WHSP, and I will also give up on paid annual leave. When I am working in the company, I will not apply or ask for paid annual leave and if I ever leave the company, I understand that I will have no right to require it to pay me for my annual leave.

Signature:

Date:

The WHS ethos was part of Company A's key corporate values, which it explained on its website ¹⁸ as:

- 'customers first',
- Jian Ku (艰苦) WHS ,
- continuous improvement,
- openness & initiative, integrity, and teamwork

Jian Ku (艰苦) is another ideological instrument that complements the WHS ethos and refers to tolerance of hardness and hardship. In essence, taken together, Jian Ku and WHS emphasise that employees will work hard and strive, no matter how harsh the environment, including a challenging natural environment or political situation in a host country. Positioned alongside WHS, Jian Ku is understood by the employee as a need to always be working hard and fighting for the company's goals, no matter what hardship or difficulty they may encounter.

The concept of Jian Ku and WHS originated in Chairman Mao's work in 1936, in his writings on The Strategic Issues of Chinese Revolution Battle. Mao said that "[w]ithout the JK [and WHS] of the Chinese Communist Party in the past 50 years, it would have been impossible to save the country from national subjugation" (see also in Lai et al. 2020, p.667). Mao emphasised the idea of struggle to inspire Chinese people and said,

Chinese revolution is a great one, but the post-revolution road is longer, greater and harder. We need to make it clear to the Party so that our comrades continue to be modest, humble, and keep the JKFD style (cited from Lai et al. 2020, p.667).

It is important to understand that the ideas that underpin WHS and Jian Ku are not limited or exclusive to Company A. Other Chinese firms have their own versions of WHS. The combination of the WHS ethos and Jian Ku reflects a central and crucial ideology of the Chinese People's Congress (CPC). It is intended to influence Chinese people generation by generation, through formal and informal education, to

¹⁸ This material was obtained from Company A's website. In the interests of the anonymity the exact source is not cited, but is available on request from the author of this dissertation.

encourage them to work hard for their life and country. In China more generally, these strong cultural and historical slogans and propaganda may not be given so much prominence nowadays. However, Company A has taken them up and actively promotes them as core values of the company's corporate culture. As one of the company's internally promotional documents says,

We should use our corporate culture, which is built on the basis of national culture, to glue employees together, collectively *work hard and strive*, and work hard for the prosperity of our great nation, for the *revitalization of the Chinese nation*, and for the happiness of yourselves and your families (emphasis added)

In this way, Company A directly links JK-WHS terminology with the old Maoist labels, in a way that (Lai et al. 2020, p.667) suggest fill it "with historical resonances as well as with relevance for the current social and economic situation".

While examples of other companies using the same sort of devices as WHS also exist, Company A's WHS contract is extremely well known and has been much debated in China. Many arms of Chinese media and netizens (online users) have criticised WHS contracts as a type of exploitation of workers, sophistically dressed up in historical decoration. It has been pointed out, for example, that the WHS terms on foregoing overtime and annual leave violate Chinese Labour Law. However, the media and online debate disappeared very shortly after it came to the public (in 2010), while the WHS contract lives on, with apparent moral legitimacy. It could be seen as an example of how companies secure the compliance of Chinese employees by relying on initiatives that are deeply intertwined with the overall political and economic system and structure. As a leading high-technology communications firm, although Company A is a privately owned company, as a national champion it has a close relationship with the state, and the WHS system reinforces ways in which that connection is experienced by workers.

Company B, in contrast, is fully state owned. It does not have the same type of WHS system and perhaps it is surprising that respondents did not reveal that the language of 'national pride' is part of everyday working life. As a state owned MNC, employees are part of the National System and loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party is required. However, there are no material benefits – such as performance bonuses or shares in the company – in return for being a loyal employee. As noted in Chapter 5,

although this was not designed into the research sample, all respondents from Company B are either established Party Members or Party Members in waiting. Arguably, as part of the National System, the core corporate values of Company B are in line with the ideology, values and objectives of the government.

Company B's core values are summarised in corporate literature as:

- respecting each other and being faithful to Company B,
- serving with dedication and being committed to customers,
- endeavouring with creativity,
- operating with scientific management.

Here it is possible to see an overlap with the JK-WHS language used in Company A, which also channels the writings of Mao, Chinese history and Party ideology to a great extent. Thus, Company B promotes similar values as WHS does in Company A. Moreover, the selection of expatriates in Company B relies on the identification of already proven and trustworthy workers. Insight into how these workers are trained in readiness for their expatriation opens up understanding of the roles they are expected to fulfil.

6.3 Training and Orientation for Expatriate Assignment

Neither Company A nor Company B provides any significant or systematic 'expatriate' training prior to work assignments outside China. With the exception of the fast track expatriate group, Company A provides all new recruits with relatively lengthy training in company values and core skills – Respondent A5 said this basic training lasted for about six to eight months. While Company A emphasises its international business ventures in all its initial training, there was no training with a specific focus on expatriate skills. Company B offers what might be deemed as pre-expatriation training but it is very short, lasting at most one to two weeks.

The elements of standardised basic training on entry to Company A were explained by respondent A5,

[...] the first week, it [the training] was focusing on the company's core values and culture, like you need to work hard and treat work as your priority, and customers

are always the first priority ... the rest focused more on skills and techniques. Many of us do not have such background knowledge in this specific industry [...] the training also emphasised a lot on our international business.

A5, Female Expatriate, Company A, Subsidiary

When Company A's new expatriates arrive at their host country, there is a system of supervision and mentoring by longer serving expatriates. Each is linked with two to four senior expatriates who act as supervisors and mentors and guide and teach them in the norms of daily business. As respondents A5 and A3 explained,

I have three supervisors and one of them have been staying in this area for ten years! I called them Lao Shi [teacher in English] ... they have been teaching me a lot of skills, like how to deal with customers ... I have learned a lot especially in some real projects [...] I admire them that they can stay for ten years! I don't think I can ... and I don't want to stay here for ten years, no way [laughing].

A5, Female Expatriate, Company A, Subsidiary

Two senior expatriates guided me in the first three months in Mali. I think learning from practice is better than any other kinds of training. So, I think our company's strategy is great at this point.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director

In this supervisory relationship the emphasis is on communicating and embedding company norms, values and skills. Integration with the host country's cultural environment and norms of work are not taught or promoted in any formal sense.

In Company B, the practice of assigning expatriates from the ranks of trusted and established employees meant that skills and values training is deemed unnecessary. Two senior managers interviewed at Company B were of the view that as all selected candidates for expatriation are technically qualified, any longer-term or additional training is unnecessary. Interviewee B1 said,

... if an expatriate needs more than two weeks for [technical] training, it means he/she is not capable to carry out any international assignments.

B1, Vice President, Company B, HQ

Moreover, if there is any additional guidance, training is not concerned with integration or cultural adjustment but rather issues of the expatriate's personal safety, as B1 explained,

... our company has many international assignments that are in developing and unsafe countries, and the company wants to enhance expatriates' safety awareness. [For example] during the training I was taught to always keep the curtains closed and not to stand by the window when working in Pakistan ... [for fear of being seen and shot]

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, Company B, HQ

Aside from this very basic guidance, Company B's pre-expatriation training concentrated wholly on technical skills. Interviewee B6 stated,

... the trainer briefed us with the information about the project to get us familiar with it and he presented on the specific skills we would need for the project, but there was nothing about cultural adjustment.

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

The fact that neither company delivers professional or cultural training for pre-expatriates has consequences, and interviews revealed some of the difficulties individuals face in being unprepared for local cultural norms and how to adjust to working alongside local employees. Some examples of such difficulties were explained by respondents A3 and B2.

I was captured by the local police when I was walking on the street in Libya because I took a picture of a building with many bullet holes (see Figure 6.2)! I was really scared and frightened as they were all armed! They checked my ID, asked a lot of questions and required me to delete it as it is a government building. My hands were shaking when I took my mobile phone from my pocket.

A3, Repatriate, Company A

The local staff are not [self] disciplined [...] If the company did not agree with them [local workers], they might go on strike. Sometimes those strike are illegal and sometimes are legal. If the strike is illegal then we can stop paying them but the

progress of some projects have been delayed ... [this is an example of the outcome of a lack of self-discipline among local staff]

B2, Expatriate, Executive, Company B



Figure 6.2 Bullet Holes in a Building in Libya

Note: this picture was provided by respondent A3.

The inability of Chinese workers to understand the motivations of their fellow workers and their unpreparedness for the traditions of their host countries, is an indication of the separateness of life for the Chinese expatriate in their host country. Dormitory accommodation is often provided, particularly in developing economies. In mature economies like the UK or Germany, even where dormitory quarters do not exist, expatriates live close to one another in rented accommodation. These forms of accommodation for expatriates further limit cross-cultural integration. This is a feature of Chinese expatriation which is all the more notable when considering that for any individual, their expatriation may last many years.

At the end of expatriate assignments there is also no training for repatriates to help them readjust to working back in China. This applies in both Company A and B. In each case the employer appears to assume that repatriates will face little difficulty in adapting to their return to the Chinese domestic working environment. This lends weight to the argument that the expatriates are regarded by the firm as company employees, regardless of the location they are assigned to work in. In practice, however, all respondents said they encountered many different forms of difficulties. For example, respondent A3 gave a picture of what their experience had been like,

No, there was no training [for my return to China] ... I started to go to work two days after I arrived in Guangzhou [... where ...] I was allocated to a different department [...] Although the working routine was not very different from the overseas subsidiary, I encountered difficulty in doing business with customers in the first month because the process [in China] is different [from my host-country posting ...for example ...] I was supposed to meet a customer in his office but he kept changing the time and places, so I had to spend a whole day driving across almost half of the city to catch him. Thank god, I finally met him in a KTV [karaoke bar]! I didn't meet any customers [to talk about business] in a KTV in Africa ...]also I did not know anyone else in the department, so I sometimes felt embarrassed when sitting in the office.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director, Company A

Similarly, B2 said,

I didn't have training before going to South Africa nor before coming back to China. I don't think our company has such policies ... Well, I received a few text

messages from colleagues saying welcome back [...but ...] I think the biggest difficulty was to establish and maintain the previous guanxi [business and interpersonal connection] with customers, since I haven't worked in China for a couple of years. Some previous guanxi customers who were in high level position have been replaced. In this case, I have lost my guanxi so it was more challenging to make business. For example, if I have a good guanxi with a customer, sometimes I just need to ring her/him and we can kind of have a rough agreement. Otherwise, if I want to have more business, I need to establish guanxi by inviting someone to a dinner to get to know each other; or what's more common is to use the existing guanxi [with a person] who can help me meet some potential or targeted customers over a dinner, which is a good way to expand [business and interpersonal] guanxi ... Guanxi means resources, money and business.

B2, Expatriate, Executive, Company B

In addition to the difficulties of readjusting to work back in China, respondents from Company A and Company B explained they might be reassigned at short notice after repatriation. It seems that once a worker has been expatriated, the Company will be more likely to reassign them, and there is a tendency that it will be to the same location or at least a similar context as their first assignment country. The majority of expatriate respondents to this study either stayed in the same country for many years, or were re-assigned to similar context countries. Respondent A6 is an exceptional case, as he was first expatriated to Nigeria before being reassigned to Germany.

Except for respondents A5, A9 and B9, who had just started their expatriation journeys, the remaining expatriates each had a minimum of three years of overseas working experience. Once settled, each company seems to want to keep individual expatriates working overseas for as long as possible. As respondent A5 mentioned, their supervisor had been staying in Kenya for 10 years, and as A7, a senior manager from the HQ in Company A explained,

... from the company's point of view, we hope experienced expatriates would stay in the host countries or go to other similar context countries ... [for example] ... like among African countries ... as they have been made familiar with business in

that country, and they can teach and train new expatriates. Many of them have got used to the work and life there, and they have a very good business network there, which is beneficial to the company business as well as their career. Of course, normally they can come back [... after three years ...] to China if they really want to. They just need to write a report to their head and explain the reasons. Normally they should stay [outside China] at least three years.

Respondents B2 and B3 shared the similar experience of being repatriated back to China before they were dispatched to new assignments again. For example, B2 was dispatched to South Africa in 2011, finished his first overseas assignment in 2016 and was sent to South Africa again at the beginning of 2019. Just as indicated by respondent A7 in relation to Company A's preferences for lengthy overseas assignments, it seems that Company B also has the intention to maintain a consistent presence of experienced expatriates in overseas subsidiaries. As B8, who had stayed in South Africa for ten years, explained,

My youth has contributed to the [South African] subsidiary from 2010 until 2020. Since I have established a wide and good guanxi [business and interpersonal network] with many customers here, the HQ leaders want me to stay here. But my parents are not very well this year, so I think it's time to go back home.

B8, Senior manager, repatriate, Company B

The role of guanxi in serving the interests of the parent company comes through strongly in these respondents' words. This highlights the roles that expatriates are expected to fulfil for the firm.

6.4 Roles of Expatriates: Operational, Capital or Dual?

Chinese MNCs typically use far more expatriates than MNCs from other countries. According to the repatriation experiences, it appears that having expatriates fulfilling operational and managerial roles is equally important to Companies A and B. Their heavy use of expatriates not only maintains a stable operational overseas workforce (Zheng and Smith 2019), but also cultivates guanxi and establishes managerial structures that promote ongoing the expansion of the companies' global business.

Chapter 5 revealed that all respondents to this study are employees selected directly by their company and none of them has been recruited from extra-firm institutions or

outside agencies. Irrespective of where the research respondents were expatriated, they joined large communities of fellow expatriates. This was the case whether they were assigned to mature industrialised economies such as the UK, Germany and Norway, or in emerging economies in parts of Africa and Asia. In the subsidiaries, junior expatriates fulfil mainly operational, technical roles, while respondents said that their top managers are almost all Chinese expatriates. In addition, the technical nature of respondents' skills means that they also fulfil dual managerial and operational roles in the subsidiaries (for comparative data, see Chen & Orr 2009; Cooke 2014; Rui et al. 2017).

While the majority of expatriate interviewees had fulfilled operational roles in the early years of their expatriation, some, such as B2, now hold very senior positions. Others are gradually moving through dual roles which combine managerial and technical (operational) responsibilities. For example, interviewees A5 and A9 undertook technical tasks and operational activities when they were relatively new expatriates, but they were supervised and guided by more mature expatriates who had gained experience and were acting in more senior dual operational and managerial roles. As respondent A9 explained,

My supervisors have been teaching [me] a lot of professional skills when we were dealing with some projects... [For example] how I should communicate with customers, what language and tone I should use to talk to them etc.

A9, Expatriate, Company A, Subsidiary

A gradual progression into managerial responsibility is the way things happen. For example, when A3 carried out his first overseas assignment, he was a junior engineer who fulfilled an entirely operational role. Within 5 years of overseas expatriation, he gradually became a senior engineer and a manager. At the time he was interviewed for this research, he was leading a team and supervising workers in some projects. In this case, his function has changed from a pure operational function to a dual one involving managerial and supervisory responsibilities. In this way, as expatriates at Company A gain experience, they fulfil a dual capital-labour function by carrying out their operational assignments while also acting in a managerial role. Similarly, in Company B, interviewees B9 and B10, being comparatively new to their expatriation, are more likely to fulfil operational roles,

while other senior expatriates fulfil a dual function, combining the capital and labour roles (for comparison, see Zheng and Smith 2019).

In addition to operational roles the research sample also includes expatriates fulfilling a mainly managerial function at executive-level (such as A4, B1, B2). These executives exert control “through rank, authority, and social influence over others within the hierarchy of the internationalised firm” (see Zheng and Smith 2019 p.493). business.” A top-down decision-making process was notable in both companies, and subordinate employees always receive assignments from their superiors. However, expatriate managers in Company A’s subsidiaries appear to have relatively more power to make decisions than those in Company B, providing the project is not sensitively connected to China’s national essential projects. A4 said,

... yeah, I have the authority to make the final decision in terms of the local business. The company gave me the power in general business. I can't make a direct decision if the project is a huge one like the building of an infrastructure project. I need to report and present such a project to the HQ before making the call.

A4, Expatriate, Executive

Relatively less decision-making power was delegated to expatriate managers in Company B’s subsidiaries. B3 explained,

I think there is a big drawback in state-owned firms, we soldiers [expatriates] do not have enough power to make decisions. I mean the HQ doesn't decentralise the power to the subsidiary. It is very centralised. They control everything! We need to report everything to the HQ [...] when we found a potential customer, we need to report to the HQ. After several rounds of assessment from different leaders, superiors, some said yes go ahead, but some said no, no hold on. Then they have a group meeting discussion [...] so after they made the final decision, we may have already lost the customers. I really don't like this system!

B3, Expatriate, Senior Manager, Company B, Subsidiary

However, the research revealed that control is exercised through the large expatriate workforce in a range of different ways. Expatriates at all levels are expected to report and communicate regularly with superiors in the subsidiaries and the HQ.

Respondents describe a huge amount of internal communication between the HQ and the subsidiaries in both firms. Each company has its intranet where employees from HQs and subsidiaries can communicate. Also, staff in HQs have different levels of access to the company projects database based on their level of managerial authority. Expatriates play an important role in this internal communication, especially in respect of technical issues. As A2 and B3 described separately,

... we report to the HQ when we get any projects. For example, we had a project, to establish and install a wireless base station in Spain last month. Once we had the project approved, I reported the relevant information of this project, such as the environment of this area, to the HQ where it provided technical support. After communicating with the HQ several times, the HQ provided an entire plan based on the context of this project. Then, I held some meetings with some of my team members to present the solution and plan on how to carry it out ...

A2, Female Former Expatriate, Company A, Subsidiary

... every single project has its internal file that HQ can have access based on different authority to follow up on the process. We use Wechat and video sessions to communicate with the HQ, discussing a range of questions about the project. After that, we transmit the HQ's plans/instructions to the team, including local staff, to implement the assignment.

B3, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B, Subsidiary

In these examples the managerial (or capital) function or a dual (capital and labour) function of expatriates can be seen from two aspects: first, direct instruction of locally hired employees and second, decision making on behalf of HQs. Specifically, expatriate interviewees all agree that locally hired staff needed to be managed in accordance with company bureaucratic requirements and be compliant with orders from superiors. The expatriates themselves either occupy senior positions in the managerial hierarchies of subsidiaries or rely on the institutionalised power of their parent firm for their authority. While host country employees are also in managerial roles, they are likely to be in more junior or mid-ranking positions, or in roles where local knowledge might be helpful. For example, interviewee A1 stated,

We have many Chinese expatriates in each department, and they normally specialise in management, technical skills as well as finance. But in the HR department, the vice HR manager is a local lady who is mainly responsible for dealing with local staff issues, such as recruitment. Also, two vice directors in the marketing department were local staff. But the majority of the local staff were working as line managers and general staff. We tried to hire more local staff to expand the market and acquire more clients.

A1, Expatriate HR Manager, Company A

Although Company A did have some host-country employees in executive positions in some subsidiaries – for example in the UK – the influence of the location and market needs to be taken into account. Respondent A7 explained,

We send our expatriates to occupy the executive positions in overseas subsidiaries, such as the CEO, CFO, and COO. Besides this, the middle management level positions were [also] mainly occupied by our expatriates, such as HR managers, marketing directors, etc. But in some European countries, we do have some host country employees who take the senior managerial position. It depends on the development strategy of the local market.

A7, Expatriate Senior Manager, Company A, HQ

Having expatriates in so many positions means that managerial, operational and dual (operational and managerial) roles are played by Chinese expatriates throughout the various subsidiaries. Institutionalised power allows expatriates to supervise subsidiaries and make decisions on local staffing. For example, an expatriate HR manager in Company A said,

Sometimes we do have difficulties to decide to hire a new host country's employee from a shortlist, especially for those who have a similar educational and working background ... [that is similar to expatriates and ethnic-Chinese overseas students] ... I do discuss with my colleagues, of course, but I have the authority to decide who is going to be hired in this subsidiary.

A1, HR Manager, Company A, Subsidiary

In addition, all expatriates enjoy invisible power to make a decision, even where they are not in the highest managerial positions. For instance, local managers or staff are more likely to follow expatriates' suggestions and advice even if expatriates' positions are junior to them. A good example of the way these social relations work in practice can be seen in the case of respondent B4. He was part of an operational team composed of mainly host country staff (from the UK), that was led by a British team leader. B4 played a role in helping local employees understand the importance of complying with the internal bureaucratic procedures of Company B. He explained,

There was a wireless project in Scotland, and the director of the project was a British man. He wanted to increase the use of a specific component to enhance the quality without reporting to the wireless solution department ... and I strongly suggested he follow the [company's] procedure, reporting to the department, and waiting for permission, although his decision was right. He was a bit unhappy, but he still took my suggestions.

B4, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B, Subsidiary

B4 was able to exert influence on his team leader from a more junior position in the hierarchy, by calling on the need for compliance with Company operating procedures. This is a subtly different situation from a dual expatriate role where managerial responsibilities are formally held alongside operational duties. In this case, B4 did *not* have a higher level of managerial authority, but as an expatriate well-schooled in company expectations, he was able to draw on his depth of experience and expatriate status to enforce company protocols. It probably caused a delay in the implementation of the team leader's (correct) solution to an operational problem, but for B4 compliance with company procedures was more important. This is an example of the self-discipline and control that his employers selected him for. Operational procedures in subsidiaries are the same as in China, and deviation is not tolerated. As B1 said,

We have our organisational principles, we should be like an army and follow them no matter where the subsidiaries are. This is the strength that can guarantee effective operation.

B1, Vice President, Company B, HQ

Expatriates report to their superiors in HQ regularly, and wait for their permission to carry out assignments, which may in part explain why in this example B4 could be so adamant that the team leader should wait for permission from HQ in China before continuing. The inefficiencies of the process are acknowledged, but procedure has to be followed, as is also reflected in the words of respondent A6,

I must ask permission from my superior even though I know how to fix the occurring problems. Otherwise, I could be the 'rule breaker'. Sometimes it is annoying because I know how to fix the problem, but I still need to tell my boss. Once, when I was carrying out an assignment in Germany, the wireless signal was abnormal, and I realised the electronic panel did not fit because of the specific environment. Thus, we need to change the whole panel. The reporting procedure lasted 3 days and finally, I got the permit for a job which would have taken 5 hours.

A6, Expatriate Engineer, Company A, Subsidiary

This centralised control approach is inter-related with the heavy use of expatriates in various positions to ensure HQs' involvement in operational and managerial decisions. As the vice president (B1) of Company B stated,

Chinese expatriates occupy all executive and key managerial positions: CEO, HR manager, directors of the engineering department and sale managers, etc. I can tell you that over 99 percent of the head in each department are Chinese [expatriates]. We need to make sure that everything is under control.

B1, Vice President, Company B, HQ

Respondent B3 gave an example of how dominant expatriates were in all functions in their subsidiary, saying,

in the engineering department, 12 out of 15 people were expatriates, and the director and two principal engineers are Chinese people

B3, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B, Subsidiary

The senior executive B2 explained that, from their perspective, one of the main reasons that their companies heavily rely on expatriates is because the capability of Chinese operational workers was perceived to be higher than their local counterparts

(see also Rui et al. 2017). This suggests it may be difficult to separate operational expectations from the attitudes cultivated towards work in the minds of Chinese expatriates, particularly when they are long-standing employees well socialised into the values of the company and the state. They are trusted employees with high levels of trusted guanxi. B2 reflects entrenched attitudes towards work, control and discipline, as he did when explaining some of the problems he experienced in dealing with host-country employees in his subsidiary in South Africa,

The local staff are not disciplined. When they are free they always come to you and want to do more work to earn more money. But when you have some work for them, they always just absent from work without any explanations. Also, I would say our expatriates are much more efficient at work because they are well trained. One expatriate can be equivalent to three local staff. [the local staff] being late for work, absent, leave earlier is the worst! [...] The union is very powerful in South Africa. Without its permit, a lot of work can't proceed. Within the company, if you have more than 40 people, then you can have your union. And they normally connect with external unions which support those local staff strongly. If the company did not agree with them, they will be on strike. Sometimes those strikes are illegal and sometimes are legal. If the strike is illegal then we can stop paying them but the process of some projects has to be postponed.

B2, Expatriate, Executive, Company B

Here again the use of the word 'disciplined' comes up. The seniority of B2 can explain the basis of his attitude towards how workers should behave. However, it is interesting that while expatriates insist on compliance with their company's internal policies, they did not necessarily attempt to impose their own working conditions and cultural approach on host-country employees. The intensity of work and expatriates' response to operational pressures is the main focus of Chapter 7, but in these quotes it is possible to see that expatriates in largely operational positions compensate (as they see it) for the weaknesses of host-country workers. For example, A8 explained that,

[I] led a team in the operational department when working in South Africa [...] There were 16 of us, and 12 were expatriates, and the rest were local workers. We Chinese workers worked from day to night, including weekends. However, the

local employees never showed up on weekends, and they left every day around 4pm. I tried to explain the importance of the project, that it was kind of urgent, but they did not just take it seriously. In order to complete the project on time, we Chinese workers were doing most of the work. This is very common, and I think the local people do not understand the [organisational working, way of working] culture.

A8, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company A, Subsidiary

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented findings that give insight into the structure of work and roles that expatriates are expected to fulfil, based on dominant corporate values in Companies A and B. The findings show how the companies used the national institutional and societal context to develop their own mechanisms to manage their employees. It also illustrates the roles that expatriates fulfilled in subsidiaries. Chapter 7 develops these themes by documenting the intensity of work that expatriates experience on a daily basis. It also considers their individual responses to the pressures of being an expatriate.

Chapter 7: Experiencing Expatriation

7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides more detailed insight into individual expatriates' concrete experiences during their work assignments. It also explores their individual motivations in life and work, and their feelings about expatriation.

There are some significant benefits to taking an international assignment, namely an increase in salary, and international working experience which could be beneficial for future career development. However, this study found that career development is not necessarily related to promotion on repatriation to China. Rather, movement into managerial roles may happen during lengthy periods of expatriation, while the social impact of expatriation is severe. This chapter provides detailed examples to reveal the individual experience of work and non-work life as an expatriate in Companies A and B, and it is structured in two main sections. First, the incentives for expatriation are presented, followed by the hardships of expatriation in section two of the chapter.

7.2 Incentives for the Expatriate - Financial Reward, Guanxi and Career Prospects

7.2.1 Financial Reward

Expatriates from both companies earned more when compared with working in China, which is an important incentive for accepting the life of an expatriate. The relatively higher salary is deemed to be the compensation for expatriates who cannot be with their families. Such an approach to managing and maintaining talent is deemed a core aspect of materialistic values in the employment relationship in China (Cooke et al. 2014). All interviewees consistently reported the monetary incentive as the main benefit for expatriates, besides their hopes for beneficial impacts for their careers and social status.

Company A underwent reforms to comply with relevant regulations and implemented a new *virtual stock option plan* that remains in effect today in 2002. Under this revised plan, employees' returns are not predetermined; instead, dividends are tied to the company's net assets at the end of the year. In 2011, around 65,000 employees participated in the plan, and by 2014, approximately 80,000 out of a total

workforce of 150,000 owned shares (See Lai 2016, p.175). However, respondents from the current study did not share much information about how many shares they have or how much they will get back.

Compared with Company B, Company A provided more kinds of compensation benefits for expatriates, beyond the increase in the basic salary. To be more specific, all expatriates from Company A received “*living-away-from-home compensation*”, and another subsidy called 'hardship compensation' which was based on conditions in the country to which the expatriate was assigned. Company A classifies countries into six levels, representing the risk from low (1) to high (6). There was no hardship subsidy for those who worked in developed countries where risks were considered to be low. However, A3 received up to 100 US dollars per day when he was in Mali which is classified in the 6th level of country groupings, namely, the most unsafe and harsh place. Table 7.1 illustrates the examples of hardship compensation communicated to the researcher by respondents.

Table 7.1 Hardship compensation in Company A 19

Categories	1	2	3	4	5	6
Case Countries	UK, Germany, Norway, AE	South Africa, Brazil	Pakistan	Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt	Ethiopia	Mali, Lybia
Amount of Compensation (in US dollar/day)	0	10	20	30	70	100

By working in Company A's subsidiaries, expatriates could earn more than double compared to working in China because of different types of compensation. For example, respondent A3, on the basis of his job with Company A, he had rebuilt the family house for his parents in their village and bought a flat in Guangzhou to live in

¹⁹ Please note that these figures were summarised by the author during 2019-2021, and it is possible this will change in 2023 and beyond.

with his wife and two sons. The price per square meter of property in Guangzhou ranges from RMB 30,000 to 100,000²⁰ (approximately £3,650-8,200), and the counterparts in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen are more than double that amount. Being able to offer a spouse a flat or a house in any of the megacities (for example, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou) is deemed a great success in the Chinese context; it is an indicator of a successful and well remunerated career, which is itself often regarded as a solid precondition for marriage (Wrenn et al. 2019). In China's current stage of economic development, the desire for better living standards is apparent and there is a need for extra material rewards (Xiao and Cooke 2012).

Honestly, the benefit money [compensation] is quite a lot, for example, my salary in China was around 20000 RMB ²¹ ... [when I was working overseas] I can get another 20000 RMB as compensation ... double! Well, it's like you have to have some sacrifices to exchange for a better life regarding personal finance to allow your family to live a better life. Mr. X. (the founder of Company A) once said, 'you earn money from the company in order to buy some [designer brand] bags for your wife. The biggest success for you is to buy a good bag for your wife.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director, Company A

When I was working in Nigeria, my salary was almost double that of my Chinese domestic income. I know our company's salary is higher than other companies in the same industry in China, while working overseas made me earn more. Well, to be honest, I wouldn't be able to pay the deposit for my first apartment if I didn't work overseas...because there were not many activities to do [and to spend money in Nigeria] and I was basically busy with work all the time, I managed to save quite a lot of money. Money is very important! I also hope I will be able to send my child/children to study abroad like you, Haha.

A6, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company A, Subsidiary

²⁰ Source: <https://www.examinechina.com/blog/cost-of-living-in-guangzhou/>

²¹ 1 pound approximately equals 8.30 RMB.

In contrast, expatriates from Company B, were not compensated to this sort of level. It offered higher salaries mainly to high-level ranking managers and executive expatriates. However, lower ranking expatriates did not get such high rewards, annual bonuses or other compensations, as were given by Company A.

Senior managers in Company B seemed quite satisfied with their earnings.

If I'm working in China I can earn 450,000 RMB, including 'Five Insurances and Housing Fund'(五险一金)²² [... whereas ...] I earned 800,000 RMB when I took my first expatriation, and now [2020] my salary has increased to about 1 million RMB.

B2, Expatriate, Executive, Company B, Subsidiary

However, for Company B expatriates in operational positions, their salary was relatively low, and they had a much lower level of compensation for working overseas.

Our basic salary in China was around 15,000 RMB, and working overseas was about 25,000 RMB. Well [in addition] during some Chinese traditional festivals, the company always offers we employees plenty of food of good quality, like rice and fruit; it also gives us some shopping cards and petrol filling cards. These kinds of benefits are good for us. But we are sometimes very jealous of employees in Company A because they earn more than us! They have different types of compensations. We have the annual compensation when we have a [pay] deal but that is just a drop in the bucket!

B3, Expatriate, Company B

²² Five Insurances and Housing Fund: Endowment insurance, medical insurance, unemployment insurance, employment injury insurance, maternity insurance, housing provident Fund.

7.2.2 Levels of Guanxi and Career Development

Guanxi played an important role in gaining access for this research and also had a significant role in the workplace (see, Warner 2011; Fang et al. 2009; Hackley and Dong 2001). Guanxi in the workplace is normally seen in the mutual relationship between colleagues, especially between superiors and subordinates, however, the influence of guanxi goes beyond the immediate working environment.

Chapter 6 introduced the WHS ethos, but here its relationship to guanxi must be emphasised. The material difference being a WHSP is reflected in different financial compensation, such as annual bonuses for instance. However, as noted earlier, the status carries significant undertakings in relation to working patterns and other payments, and a commitment to always put the company's interests first. The consequences of refusing to sign up to WHS after being invited to do go beyond a loss in potential earnings; refusal carries a real risk of losing a good guanxi relationship with superiors. Typically, the superior might reckon that the subordinates were not ready to be committed to work or were not fully in favour of the working culture of the company. A female employee (A11) who had been working in Company A HQ for 8 years said,

... if you don't want to be a WHSP, your superior will see you differently. Even though you have the great working capability, you may not have the chance to be promoted compared to a WHS employee. No one would say this explicitly, but that's what I have seen.

A11, Female Employee employed at Company A, HQ

While the increased guanxi associated with WHS status was seen as part of the pathway to promotion in Company A, a loss of guanxi while expatriated would have implications beyond the subsidiary and one specific work assignment, as the WHS system applied across all Company A employees, irrespective of location.

There were other aspects of guanxi which were undermined by expatriation and might affect individuals badly. Specifically, when expatriates left China, the guanxi between them and their former colleagues and superiors began to fade away. B1, an executive repatriate, emphasised that guanxi only exists *where you are working*, because it relies on interactions with colleagues and leaders. The relationship

between work location and guanxi throws up many complications, with potential direct impact on future promotion prospects. There were subtle differences between Company A and Company B in this respect.

Most respondents from Company A did not directly express the close link between guanxi and promotion but, for example, in the comments from respondent A3, the connection is implied,

... if your annual performance evaluations showed a good record, it is easier to be promoted. But the superior is in part of the evaluation system as he/she needs to evaluate the annual record and give you the grade ...

A3 Expatriate Company A

It is implied here that good guanxi is necessary to get that good grade.

In Company B, respondents were much more direct about the link between guanxi and promotion. While the state-owned company was characterised by bureaucracy and hierarchical structures which included promotion assessment processes and relevant criteria, respondents seemed to suggest that the promotion process in Company B is very tightly related to good guanxi. A superior can recommend an employee and may even have the authority to influence or make the decision. B2 said,

If an executive-level leader could recommend you or even just said something positive for you in their meeting, then it's very likely that you can be promoted. I think that [the use of guanxi] is common in China.

B2, Expatriate, Executive, Company B

Also, in Company B, selection as an expatriate reflects strong trust relations with senior managers. These types of trust relations are quite specific and while they are distinct from guanxi they are closely related to it. For example, trust relations are the foundation for an offer of expatriation in Company B or WHS status in Company A. In each case, a refusal would harm not only bonds of trust but also guanxi. This distinction between 'trust relations' and guanxi is difficult to explain in western terms. Perhaps the best way to define it, is that trust is more an aspect of mutual trust interpersonal relations while guanxi is a form of social capital which can be put to

use or exchange by individuals. So, the refusal of an expatriate assignment at Company B would not only undermine interpersonal trust relations between a junior and superior colleague but would also damage guanxi more broadly, and it is the loss of guanxi that might materially affect career prospects. The way the relationship between expatriation, guanxi and promotion worked is therefore quite complicated.

During the research period, no expatriate interviewed (either from Company A or B) was *officially* promoted while in their overseas subsidiaries. However, expatriates in both Companies moved from straightforward operational labour functions to more dual managerial and operational responsibilities and performed dual capital and labour functions in the subsidiary. Moreover, Company A lets it be known the experience of working overseas is essential and makes it easier to be promoted when returning to China. This was another incentive for Company A expatriates.

I was working in China ... now the globalisation of Company A is continuing to expand rapidly, if you only work in China then you would be unlikely to be promoted in future.

A4, Expatriate, Executive, Company A, Subsidiary

Like when you reach level 17, if you want to be promoted, then you need to have overseas working experience.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director

Despite the apparent interrelationship between guanxi, expatriation and career development, in practice, hardly any respondents to this study had received a promotion at the point of return to China. Some of the repatriates, such as respondents A10, B6 and B8, returned to the same department as they were in before going abroad, while other returning respondents had been allocated to new departments. In order to test the longer-term career impact of expatriation a further study on expatriates' life would be necessary. This study provides a snapshot of expatriation across two years and it is acknowledged that respondents could be promoted in future. However, on the basis of respondents' experiences and the findings from this two year study, it is noteworthy that promotion was not an automatic or speedy reward for an overseas assignment upon repatriation. This suggests that returning to China was not the trigger for promotion – rather promotion

occurred at different points across the whole of an employee's career, with repatriation after a work assignment outside China being taken as a phase of employment rather than a cause for reward.

For those respondents who had gone through the expatriation-repatriation cycle, the end of an assignment could be a time of some stress and uncertainty. In Company A, a written policy of how to treat repatriates – or set of regulations – published to staff in 2017, states that expatriates coming to the end of their assignments should be contacted by company HQ twice, first at 9-6 months and then 6-3 months before repatriation. At the first point of contact, the HQ is supposed to identify the expatriate's working experience abroad and their preference in terms of returning to work in China. At the second point of contact, the policy states that expatriates should list five working preferences, such as, for example, the type of positions they might like in China. After returning, the company is supposed to provide some training for the repatriate, including an introduction to the company's new products. It is also supposed to give a party for expatriates' families, to help them adjust to their return to their domestic environment. However, the respondents employed by Company A said they did not receive any of the required information, nor were they asked for their wishes or plans at repatriation. Respondents A6 and A3 explained,

I did not have any information about a new posting or training after coming back from Nigeria. I directly started to work [in China] when I came back within a week ... and then I was sent to Germany. I felt that I was like a robot ...[laughs]

A6, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company A, Subsidiary

I started to go to work after two days when I arrived back in Guangzhou [from my expatriate assignment], although I would have liked to have had some rest, to adjust to the jet lag and spend more time with my family ... I felt tired but I had to go to my new department and start to work.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director, Company A

In Company B, there were no written documents regarding repatriation, but respondents told of similar experiences. Take B1 as an example. B1 expressed his strongly disgruntled attitude towards what he saw as the company's weak policy of repatriate management.

I was not informed about anything before coming back to China except for an email about my flight tickets information. I think this is just disrespectful! I worked so hard overseas and I even took the risk of my life! I should have deserved more respect!

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, Company B, HQ

Furthermore, there were difficulties over work placements back in China due to expatriates having been replaced during their overseas assignment. As B1 continued saying,

My previous position was occupied by someone when I came back to China and they allocated me to a new position, which was the same level as my previous one ... I didn't get promoted to a higher position, so of course ... I am not happy with that.

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, Company B, HQ

Similar to respondent B1's experience, respondents A10 and B6 shared their own experience,

When I returned to China, I was still a senior engineer, but I would like to be promoted as a project manager or something like that. My salary level was the same as before [in China]. Frankly speaking, the income has reduced [when returning to China] because working in overseas subsidiaries can have some compensations.

A10, Repatriate, Senior engineer, Company A

After 4 years expatriation, I did not have any promotion when returned to China. My salary was the same as I left China ... I would expect to be promoted to be a manager you know.

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

Similarly, in Company A, promotion was not associated with the end of an expatriate assignment. For instance, A3, who had worked in what he perceived as politically unstable and extremely unsafe countries (such as Mali) for 5 years, said,

... for me, these expatriation experiences did not help me in terms of the career promotion. I was allocated to a new department when returned to China, so it is kind of impossible for me to get promoted. But for someone who was already a leader before expatriation, he/she may be got back in the same position. Of course, if you have good performance records, plus good guanxi with your superior(s) or someone in a high position in the company, then you may be promoted faster when you are back.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director, Company A

This last reference to guanxi is complex for repatriates. As the expatriate assignments last several years, the guanxi, connection, and relationship with superiors and colleagues becomes less close, more estranged and weaker over time. This was a factor reported most particularly by respondents from Company B, the state owned firm where guanxi appears to play a more prominent role in decision making. B1 explained,

I remember that my superior had made some verbal promises about the promotion and salary increase to me. However, when I came back, he was already transferred to another department and no longer had the power to promote me [...] There was no contract which guaranteed my career development before going abroad [...] My new superior barely knew me, and of course I was not promoted, although my previous boss promised me [I would be] before I went overseas.

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, Company B, HQ

In summary, any promise of expatriation as career enhancing was not reported as a prompt or straightforward outcome at repatriation by the nine respondents to this study who had experience of repatriation. The experience gained while working overseas seems not to be a determining factor in terms of the promotion ladder in either of the companies, at least in the short term. However, the data does reveal that expatriates are moving through operational, dual and managerial roles *while expatriated* in subsidiaries. This may be associated with the Companies' desire to prolong expatriate assignments and maintain guanxi in subsidiaries. It will be worth expanding the sample and conducting a long-term study to trace expatriate career development in the future, which would be a meaningful potential research topic for a

post-doctoral study. In the next section of the chapter, the discussion moves to focus on the hardships of expatriation, and how the expatriates in this study responded to such hardships.

7.3 The Hardships of Expatriation – Locations, Targets, Accommodation, Work Intensity and Family

Scholars and commentators have used different words, including ‘hard work’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘eating bitterness’ or ‘hardship tolerance’, to describe the experiences of Chinese expatriates, highlighting that their expatriation involves intense work schedules and is significantly challenging (see Rui et al. 2017; Lee 2017; Zheng and Smith 2019, Lai et al. 2020). In particular, ‘eating bitterness’ is a direct translation from Chinese *Chi ku*. This section of the chapter presents more detail on research participants’ feelings about family disruption, intensive working and the life of an expatriate, and considers their daily routine and experiences from their individual perspectives. In presenting expatriates’ struggles with their work and non-work lives, the term ‘hardship tolerance’ will be used when appropriate, as ‘hard work’ may not reflect the full extent of what is involved. Also, hardship tolerance is referred to in the core corporate WHS culture of Company A. Although Company B did not have such an explicit or clearly emphasised culture, expatriates’ experiences were very similar.

7.3.1 Work Locations

A total of 14 out of 27 respondents to this study had expatriation experiences in emerging economies, including Mali, Libya, Pakistan, South Africa, Ethiopia, Sudan and Nigeria. In some of these countries the natural environment and the political situation were significantly challenging for Chinese expatriates. The following quotes illustrate some of the experiences that respondents had while expatriated.

To complete the cooperating project, T base station²³, with the local government on time, my team had been working for 3 months in the desert in Nigeria, with tolerance to the heat and long working time. I remember I was only able to take a shower once a week because we need to save the limited water. I will never forget

²³ Because of the sensitivity of the project, it is given the pseudonym ‘T based station’.

this experience in my life! Honestly, I do not think young generations want to experience this.

A6, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company A, Subsidiary

I have to overcome the harsh environment [in Mali] (see Figure 7.1) and the lonely, boring life there. It was a huge challenge, physically and mentally. This country has been suffering from materials shortage and there was barely any development of any industries... In 2014, there was an Ebola virus outbreak (see Figure 7.2) and that was the first time I felt the tremendous fear in my life...luckily, none of us [expatriates and other colleagues] was infected. I stayed there for two years [pause] we had a project there. I normally worked from 8 am to 8 pm because there wasn't enough power in that area so it went very dark in the evening. I think the biggest challenge was the unsafe issue there, and I felt very insecure [unsafe]. You know the country has been in civil war for a long time and it was very often [common] to hear a gunshot or to see tanks passing over. Although we were in a relatively safe area as it was then protected by the local government and Chinese embassy, I still felt unsafe and anxious sometimes.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director, Company A



Figure 7.1 Living Area in Mali

Note: this picture was provided by respondent A3.



Figure 7.2 Ebola Virus Outbreak in Mali

Note: this picture was provided by respondent A3.

The conditions in their host countries were alien for these expatriates. They speak of the challenges of isolation and insecurity, with little idea of how long their assignment was to last. As respondent A10 described, there were many examples of discomfort and anxiety,

We drove 12 hours from our dorm. While we were driving, it was raining heavily so we can barely see anything through the car's front window. The condition of the road was bumpiness and terrible as well! At that moment, I was very frightened! Because it rained too heavily, we were so afraid that we would experience the debris flow. I was sitting in the front, and I was holding the car's handle above my head extremely tight. I think all of us were so scared as no one seemed to have such experience before. Everyone just kept silent...horrible situation! I am still feeling that now when I am talking to you about that experience [silence for 20 seconds] we drove very slowly for about an hour or so, we finally found a place where we can park and wait until the crazy rain stopped. We kind of got stuck in the middle of nowhere but at least we were safe. We were sitting in the car with our equipment for about 3 hours with anxiety, nerves, and panic. I have one moment thought that we would never get there. This sounds like a scene of a movie, right? When the rain stopped, we were very happy and continued our journey. After another 5 hours of driving, we finally arrived at our destination, well, a very small hostel. But we were just so happy although we were all exhausted.'

A10, Repatriate, Senior engineer, Company A

These sorts of hardships were shared by expatriates at Company B.

My team was dealing with a project in Sudan in 2010. It is very common to see tanks and guns and hear gunshots due to the conflict between the government and anti-government forces. I remembered that the 20 of us were wearing body armour while working. I was very frightened in the beginning because I have never experienced this before, although I knew it is a developing and, unsafe country. After settling down for several months, I got used to it but still felt anxious sometimes. I think young people in China do not want to work in such a terrible environment.

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

I was suffering from a severe diarrhoea as I drank a cup of tap water in India. I felt that I was gonna die there. I got a fever, very high body temperature like 40 °C. My face turned to purple [pause] but I didn't stop contacting and visiting customers [...] I got sunstroke several times as it was too hot there. Severe headache with fever and it lasted for a week. Terrible, terrible memory.

B3, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

Such accounts speak of expatriation as a very difficult, perhaps traumatic, memory for the individuals concerned. It is important to remember that most say they had no preparation for this experience beyond the technical training needed to fulfil their operational – labour – function. More than one commented on the probability that young expatriates ‘today’ would not like to endure the same experiences. This is an interesting question, and one that the Discussion will reflect on in Chapter 8. Despite all the risks, there were few signs in this research that expatriates, young or old, would actually reject the chance of expatriation on such grounds. Two of this research sample looked for alternative employment, but the majority stayed as expatriate employees in their Company.

For respondents working in developed economies at the time of this research, their hardship still existed. They are away from their families, overtime working is high, and so is the pressure from the HQs – and this applied in both Companies A and B.

7.3.2 Targets and Work Intensity

Both companies used performance evaluation systems and for expatriates it was a highly competitive struggle for survival. As interviewees recalled,

I must keep the balance between the separation rate and the induction rate, otherwise my salary will be deducted. What's worse is that the company weeds out 5% of the worst employees per year based on our performance records! It is very stressful.

A1, HR Manager, Company A, Subsidiary

My mobile phone has to keep on 24/7 in case my boss calls me from the HQ. I don't like this but can I say no? Work is always the priority even during holidays. When I receive a call from my superior, I have to respond to him and start to work.

B7, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

The HQ gave a deadline in each phase of a project. I had to update every day to the HQ and ensure to complete the job before the deadline, otherwise, I would have a bad record. Sometimes I feel the pressure just reach to the top [...]

working overnight is nothing new for me but I have no choice! I don't want to have a heart attack or a sudden death!

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

Both companies had their grading system to assess employees' performance and impose pressure on employees. Company A employees, including expatriates, are graded A, B, C, and D every half a year, based on their business performance. The top 5% of performers are awarded an 'A' grade, with the next 10% being given a 'B'. Those who received an A or B grade can have a very attractive amount of money as an annual bonus, however, the 80% of workers who are awarded a C would probably not have a decent annual bonus. The bottom 5% are awarded a D grade, and for them there is either the likelihood of ongoing monitoring or the real possibility that they will be 'persuaded' to leave the company. This assessment system was jointly developed by Company A and renowned consulting companies, such as IBM and Accenture. It was impossible to access the relevant internal documents, but details of the scheme were obtained in interviews, anonymised and then cross checked with other Company A research participants. The researcher did not ask expatriates to provide any hard copies of documents for the sake of their safety.

Similarly, in Company B, employees were also marked by A (top 10%), B (next 30%), C (next 55%), and D (next 5%). Participants expressed their feelings of being pressured from this grading system as they were afraid that they may get a C or D, which would give them a bad record and increase the risk of dismissal. If they do well, they are given bonuses but rewards are not as great as would be paid to expatriates in similar jobs or positions in Company A. Company B workers receive much less annual bonus, for example. Some interviewees recalled their experiences and feelings of being marked in the assessment process,

I received an A this year [in June] I am very happy [laugh]. But my individual annual designated target is 5 million US dollars! Oh my god! I don't think I can achieve it in such a terrible situation, COVID, and Sino-US trade war. The local economy is a mess and I think now only the Chinese government has some money [laugh]. The department head here doesn't care [about the current situation]! He just focuses on the result. The annual goal of our department is to achieve 25 million US dollars! If we are not able to get it, we will probably get a

very bad mark at the end of the year! We may have to put a knife on our clients' necks [to achieve the target] hehe.

A5, Female Expatriate, Company A

I feel stressed by the grading system, although I never got any C or D, yet. But still, I have a family to raise, and I can't lose my job so I have to work hard to have a good grade, ultimately to earn more money. Compared with Company A, we have a much less annual bonus! We are in the same sector, and I think we expatriates [in both companies] work very hard.

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

During the data collection period in 2020, the Sino-U.S. trade dispute majorly impacted both firms' overseas business. Employees in Chinese domestic and overseas subsidiaries had to work harder than ever. For example, respondent A3 posted a picture of his watch (see Figure 7.3), the pointer pointed at 5 a.m., on WeChat to boast how he had been working *for more than 48 hours* to cope with the crisis of the pressure from the U.S.



Figure 7.3 The Five O'clock Watch

Note: this picture was provided by respondent A3.

Other interviewees also shared their experiences,

We are suffering from the trade war at the moment! The local government still owes our company a large amount of money and the HQ always gives us pressure to negotiate with the government about the money. Because of the ban from the U.S. government, many projects have been postponed and even cancelled! We need to convince our customers to continue to cooperate with us. For example, we will probably need to find some alternatives to replace some

components in future projects or maintenance so we need to explain this clearly to our customers and ensure that the quality is guaranteed.

A5, Female Expatriate, Company A

The sale of our products has been decreased a lot because people are concerned about the functions of them!

A9, Junior Expatriate, Company A

We have lost more than 10 potential customers in a month [because of the trade dispute]! Can you imagine how much money we lost? what we are doing now is to do our best to maintain our customers! We are really really stressed! And we don't know when it will end [a deep sigh].

B9, Junior Expatriate Engineer, Company B

In addition, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world has been going through an uncertain and difficult time, and is currently in the shadow of economic recession. Both Companies A and B have encountered difficulty in terms of their global business. For example, projects have had to be postponed and in some countries, local governments have not been able to fully pay what they owe. However, neither Company A nor B lowered any requirements in terms of their business targets, rather they appeared to be pushing expatriates harder to seek out money and develop more clients.

Although harsh working conditions are salient for expatriates in this study and some of the interviewees express concerns about work pressure, there are also expressions of pride and anxiety that seem contradictory. Some express their pride in being an expatriate or employee in their company while simultaneously complaining about conditions of work. This corporate-national pride was particularly outstanding in Company A, as it is deemed a *Chinese leading high technology MNC* that represents the interests of the country. For example, A3 stated,

I am proud of being a 'Company A man' because we never surrendered whatever difficulties we encounter. During the increasing amount of pressure from the US government, I would dedicate all myself to the company!

Similarly, A4 said,

It's an honour for me that I'm growing up with Company A [...] we never surrender whatever difficulties that we encounter, and we are very resilient, which is Company A's spirit. I am very happy to see its success and I am proud that I'm part of it! Our company provides the best platform for every employee, and I think we all appreciate that.

A4 Expatriate Executive, Company A

Similarly, interviewees A2, A6 and A10 also expressed their pride in being an employee in Company A, and their pride was evident especially after they completed some tasks or projects. Some of them felt that because the company is in a leading position in the world industry, they were representing the country. In the context of the technology cold war (part of the trade war) between the U.S. and China, this kind of pride became significantly salient. The sense of pride and responsibility of expatriates also suggests that the level of commitment of these employees is relatively high, which reflects patriotic sentiments (Hoffman 2006, also 2010).

Compared with Company A, expatriates in Company B also showed a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to their work, though their expressions of pride were less directly made and they did not use such strong words to describe their feelings. For example, respondents B1 and B6 said,

As an employee in a Chinese company, I feel responsible for changing the reputation of 'made in China'. As a leader, I need to guarantee the quality of all projects and products, to gain the trust of clients.

B1, Repatriate, Vice President, HQ

When I was working overseas, I took my job very seriously because I don't want people to say anything negative about the quality of our projects. Although the environment was harsh there, I still tried my best to overcome every difficulty and ensure the quality of work.

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

While these expressions of pride seemed totally sincere and sometimes passionate, contradictions are apparent in other comments made by the *same* expatriates. On the one hand, they expressed their pride in being an employee in the company

because they contribute to the success of the firm and they advocate such corporate culture; on the other hand, they feel stressed and complain about the intensity of work. An example can be seen from A2 who expressed that she feels proud when she completes her assignment, but she feels too stressed as work occupied all her life. As a result, she recently left the company. She said,

the work makes me frustrated and I don't want to be in this toxic environment anymore [...] so I joined a German company instead, with less stress.

A2 Female Former Expatriate, Company A

A3 publicised his long working hours on social media with pride but also complained when interviewed that “*sometimes I feel that I am like a machine, just work, work, work*”. He even said he felt “*like a robot*”, though he accepts and celebrates the WHS culture. Respondent A4, who also appreciates the company, said, “*I felt that I was a puppet*.” Such examples of contradictory statements highlight the internal struggle that expatriates appear to have in reconciling their work with their life. Nobody wanted to be the one who challenged or fought against the company’s practices publicly as there would be severe consequences, such as loss of job. Meanwhile, there is little evidence that either company took care of individuals’ physical and mental well-being (see also Zhu et al. 2018; McGrath-Champ 2016; Bader 2014).

Many participants who had experienced or were experiencing such hardship commonly used phrases like “*that’s my job, so I have no choice*” to express their helplessness to change things. They understood the stress imposed by their work and somehow internalised their conflict. These practices have been referred to as ‘dissonance’ in the literature (Danford and Zhao 2012), where individuals make peace with a situation by seeing it as inevitable, of having no alternative. This finding contrasts with other research (by Lai et al. 2020, for example), which argues that individual expatriates feel that they do have agency and choice in how to make their destiny (see Lai et al. 2020). While it will not be possible to generalise from the present study, as it is based on a small sample, there appeared to be no sense of individual agency or capacity for choice conveyed by interviewees. There were two exceptions in the two expatriates who left the company and sought employment elsewhere but their choice involved exit rather than being able to exert influence to change the working environment. For the majority of respondents, once the initial

choice to be employed or pursue employment by Company A or B was made, their autonomy seemed to fade away.

Among the exceptions to this rule is A2. She decided to leave Company A and she joined a German company. Her background and personal history give some clues about her exceptionalism. She studied in Germany for years and she was younger compared with the majority of other research participants. It may be that this combination gave her the confidence to believe that she could have more choices. Her experience led me to question whether A5, who was another young, female expatriate who used to study in the U.S., might make a similar choice in the future. A5 also expressed a negative attitude towards working in a Kenyan subsidiary and implied that she will probably not choose to stay in the host country, and that she might leave the company and join another one. The issue of sustainability of these expatriation processes has emerged (Zheng and Smith 2019; Cooke 2012), and this will be further discussed in Chapter 8. However, compared to these young workers, those who are older, have been working in the company for years and have a family to raise, hardly seem to have much chance to choose to say 'NO'.

7.3.3 Accommodation

The limitations on expatriate options were bounded in a literal sense, by the accommodation they lived in during their expatriation. As expatriates were mostly firm-assigned and selected through firm-bounded recruitment, dormitory accommodation continued the isolation of Chinese expatriates from the societies they worked in. It suggests that Companies A and B were concerned to preserve the Chinese way of doing things. The lack of integration promoted by Chinese management can be seen in the enclosed and separate accommodation of expatriates, especially in developing countries. Expatriates of all levels were allocated to live in the same accommodation (Smith 2003; Smith and Pun 2006),

The company rents a whole a housing estate. Like a dormitory. We all live here. Like a flat with 3 bedrooms and two living rooms. I share it with other colleagues. It's okay and safer, but I prefer to have more privacy honestly.

A5, Female Expatriate, Company A, Subsidiary

Similarly, B2, Expatriate, Executive, Company B, Subsidiary, stated,

We are all living in the same building, and we are normally eating together and talking about work, life, etc., every day by Wechat. Yeah, we are always together so there is no privacy or personal life.

There may have been very good reasons for housing Chinese expatriates together in units in developing economies where amenities for the general population, like water, power and so on may be in short supply and personal security may be an issue. However, this does not aid understanding of the host-country context. Even where expatriates are working in more developed countries, and where both companies provided a subsidy for them to rent houses or flats, they are encouraged to stay in the same or nearby neighbourhood. In addition, apart from the integrated accommodation management, both firms also had their canteens in their subsidiaries, where Chinese expatriates can have Chinese authentic food and gather together (Khan et al. 2019). As A4 noted,

We eat really well. Mr. X (the founder) said you won't feel homesick as long as you can have great Chinese food (see Figure 7.4). We Chinese expatriates always have a meal together and we think that the best Chinese restaurant in this country is our canteen [...] Our company recruits the best Chinese cooks and chefs with a high salary!



Figure 7.4 Food in Company A's UAE overseas subsidiary.

Note: this picture was provided by respondent A4.

Such management of living accommodation provides a relatively secure guarantee for expatriates in unsafe countries, and the hiring of top-class Chinese chefs could mitigate their feeling of homesickness to some extent. However, this form of Chinese 'integrated management' also constrained expatriates' social life in the host country. They work and live in their subsidiary area, and for most, seeing their colleagues was the sum total of their social life. Indeed, because of the intensity of work, they did not seem to *have* much social time or individual life outside work. Dormitory living also largely restrained expatriates' interaction with local workers, with a potential negative impact on their work communication as well as their understanding of local working norms and social culture. A3 expressed his feelings towards this way of managing their working and non-working life,

We lived in the company's dormitory and went to work in the morning, always working overtime in evenings, and weekends, which means that we have no social life or very limited and enclosed social life. It's like, you have been working in this company for 10 years, but you would still feel that it's the same as 10 years

ago when you first joined it. I wish I could have a more social life, but I always have too much work to do. Sometimes I feel that I am like a machine, just work, work, work...

A3, Repatriate, Company A

I barely socialise with local employees though, as I am working and living with Chinese expatriates. Maybe some of my colleagues have some social events where they could socialise with some local clients, but that's rare. Sometimes I feel that I am still like a student in the university campus, dorm, and classrooms [office], but with much fewer activities.

B10, Expatriate, Company B

7.3.4 Working Patterns and Intensity of Work

While Companies A and B use a high number of expatriates and Chinese MNCs use more expatriates than other MNCs, respondents suggested that the numbers in subsidiaries are low in relation to the volume of work they are expected to do. Employees in China normally specialised in the specific tasks of work in their assigned department, whereas some expatriates in overseas subsidiaries had to carry out more than one task in different areas of the business. As A5 and B3 explained,

Because we don't have a lot of people here [compared with Chinese domestic workplaces], I need to do more work. I should be dealing with customer lines but at the same time, I also need to do some financial and economics work. So, like I am actually doing 2-3 people's work. Well, I did learn a lot from my work, but it's just overwhelming sometimes.

A5, Female Expatriate, Company A

I am an engineer, but I also have to meet clients as well. I sometimes feel that I am a salesman when I go out with my colleagues to talk business with our clients; I need to explain explicitly in terms of some professional technical plans or issues. It wasn't supposed to be my job but I think it's good for me to extend the guanxi with clients

B3, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

The focus on customer service underpinned the 'silent rules' that applied to expatriates in both companies while working in subsidiaries. Though there were no written documents, it was understood that all expatriates were expected to be able to be contacted anytime. As A3 said,

We are not allowed to switch off our mobile phones anytime! I don't like it but you know, but I have no choice

A8, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company A, Subsidiary

B4 shared the same experience,

I need to keep my phone on 24/7! [silent] well, I just get used to it because the work has to be done

B4, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B, Subsidiary

Intensive working routines were common in both companies with long working hours the norm for expatriates. Respondents generally referred to having to work overtime during nights and weekends to complete work assignments. This applied in developed and developing countries, and even sometimes they had to stay in their office (and not return to their living quarters) when they had some urgent projects. Working for more than ten hours per day and at least six days per week was not unusual, especially so in Company A. As respondent A4 and others said,

I normally work for 16 hours per day. Just except for sleeping, brushing teeth, and washing my face, and being in a daze, the rest of the time is working [...] Of course, it's just my case ... if you want to say average for other expatriates, it's like 12 hours for employees. 8:30am-8:30pm. Of course, I feel very tired and stressed sometimes, but that's my job, so I have no choice.

A4, Expatriate, Executive, Company A, Subsidiary

My laptop was always with me because I had to be ready to work anytime, even when I was on holiday. This is just very common for me, but I found it really stressful. Well, I decided to quit last year and joined a German company where I found it less stressful.

A2 Female Former Expatriate, Company A

I kept working until 4 or 5 a.m .for about two weeks in 2018 and maybe only slept for 2-3 hours per day. My nose started to bleed on an evening, and it did not stop until three days later. I was freaking out and went to the hospital, and thank god all figures [of the tests] showed normal [...] last year [2021]. I only had one day off, I meant I didn't turn on my laptop, and that was on the 1st May.

A15, Expatriate, senior manager, Company A, Subsidiary

Even when expatriates were on their annual holiday to visit their family, they also had to work remotely. As A3 said,

We have loads of work to do [...] We have our work to do, and there is nobody to spare (一个萝卜一个坑). Other colleagues can only help to buy you a little time, but you still need to complete your tasks. So, a lot of people think it would be so tiring to go home [China], as you still need to continue to work from home! My experience was like I just finished some work and about to sleep, but because of the jet lag then I received some calls and emails from the overseas subsidiary, then I had to work remotely [pause] so it is impossible to reject to work with any reasons or excuses. The core culture of Company A is to concentrate on work – the WHS system – and work is always the priority. If the task is urgent, then no one would care what you are doing or where you are [silence for about 20 seconds] ... well, we get used to it, we have no choice.

A3, Repatriate, Project Director

The intensive working culture did not only apply in overseas subsidiaries. It was also present in Chinese domestic counterparts, which was particularly salient in Company A. Such hours and work intensity are directly in line with its norms, culture and practices, and its public profile. Chinese media has more than once reported on Company A's 'overtime working' culture. There are stories of some employees in Company A going to work prepared with a small folding bed in case they have to stay overnight to work overtime in the company.

The overtime working culture advocated in Company A is in line with their WHS values. This sets up all sorts of contradictory behaviours in expatriates. It is apt to refer back to the example of Respondent A3 once again here. He is the respondent who posted a picture of his watch reaching five o'clock in the morning on his Wechat

Moment to show that he was just finishing work. His work late into the night was done in the context of the US trade war, and he posted: “*we are fighting for our company! for our country! Proud! The sunrise is so beautiful!*” As he was a WHS employee, his overtime working would have been deemed voluntary and without extra pay but as noted earlier, this same respondent said when interviewed that he dreaded the long hours, “I feel exhausted about the long hour working and sometimes it is very frustrating.”

This is an example of the complex mix of feelings expressed by the expatriates interviewed for this study. There is probably an element of self-presentation going on in the WeChat post, which would have been read by fellow workers and managers, whereas his fatigue was only revealed in this research interview. However, it does help to reveal internal contradictions being experienced by individuals who are proud of their work while also physically and mentally exhausted by the working regime.

Compared with Company A, Company B also had an overtime working culture but as a state-owned firm it did not get so much publicity or targeted media attention. It is normally the case that state-owned firms like Company B keep a low-profile. The public barely sees any news of them, apart from some positive items relevant for issues of national development. In contrast, Company A's news and advertisements are almost everywhere in Chinese social media. While Company A's identity as a long hour working, market leading firm are part of its public image, Company B is far more quiet about its working regime. Nevertheless, respondents B2 and B10 explained,

I am working every day [of the week] ... working overtime is nothing surprising. Sometimes I feel really exhausted ...I usually wake up around 6:30 am and arrive to the office around 7:30 am. I sometimes need to go out and meet some clients as well. The fixed working time is [from 7:30 am] to 5 pm, but I always work in the evening till about 1am, sometimes in my office and sometimes in my room.

B2, Expatriate, Executive, Company B

It is very common to work from day to night on fieldwork, no matter what the local natural environment is. Working over 12 hours a day is just not surprising.

B10, Expatriate, Company B

7.3.5 Family Relationships

The majority of the expatriates in this study – and Chinese expatriates more generally – work overseas without their family. Neither Company A nor Company B encouraged expatriates to take their families to live with them during expatriate assignments. Company A advocated that work should be the expatriate's priority. A common theme in discussions with respondents was that only when it is possible to work hard without other distractions, can you earn much more money to feed your family back home. Moreover, due to the technological advancements in trade between China and Western countries, the level of mutual trust has been decreasing continuously. As a result, Company A has adopted more stringent management measures for its expatriates - expatriate employees who marry westerners risk being forced to leave their expatriate assignment or be sacked, and such behaviour will be seen as a betrayal within the company (see the screenshot²⁴).

At Company B, none of the research participants had their family with them overseas. In fact, Company B expatriates had to abide by strict rules that they should *not* take their family overseas without very specific permissions, as they were Party members and cadres. This applied particularly to the executives and other high-level managerial expatriates. One unspoken reason for this policy is the perceived risk that if they were accompanied by their family senior employees might stay in the host country, especially in developed economies and western countries. However, another factor was that, because most of the expatriates were dispatched to emerging economies where living conditions could be challenging, it would not have been ideal for them to have their family with them. While expatriates employed by both Companies said that they would not have sufficient time to look after their families while expatriated because of the intensity of their work, when interviewed

expat employees that marry westerners faced being forced to leave Europe or be sacked, investigation reveals

A Chinese former expat employee said that marrying a local in Europe is informally viewed within the company as an act of betrayal

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many respondents expressed feelings of guilt about being absent from their family, especially those who had children. As A3 said,

Working in Company A [especially in overseas subsidiaries] is very intensive, and staff can't take care of their family that much [...] the guilt of neglecting my family is the worst thing ... well, but I can't do anything more at this time. [Once] when my family needed me ... I couldn't be there with them ... I think we all have this common sense that we need to sacrifice our small family to achieve the goal of our company (牺牲小我(家), 成全大我).

A3, Repatriate, Project Director

Some contradictions appeared in this quote. This participant felt that he owed his family a lot, yet he also thought it was acceptable to sacrifice his family in order to commit to the interests of the company. Among all the respondents to this study, only one (employed at Company A) had his wife and two children with him on his expatriate assignment. This happened because his wife was also an expatriate of a Chinese state bank. This situation was exceptional. A4 explained,

Now I have brought my family here, but I only see them once a week. That's the biggest shame I would say. I cannot accompany them every day. As a father, I brought them here because I didn't want to miss the time when they grew up. No matter how successful your career can be, or how great your spirit can achieve, it will be your lifetime shame if you can't be with your family and children. So I brought them here but we are living in different cities – I'm in Abu Dhabi, and they are living in Dubai. I normally go back and visit them once a week over weekends. Yeah, I can't be with them every day, that is my greatest shame. But it's okay. Compared with some other colleagues, the majority of them are alone here.

A4, Expatriate, Executive, Company A, Subsidiary

For other respondents, they did not see their families for very long periods and it was a cause of distress. The following comments are typical.

I didn't want to accept my first international assignment because my daughter was in junior high school and faced the High-school entrance examination, and I wanted to be there with her [...] working overseas, indeed, I can earn much more as you see, but I feel guilty about my family.

B2, Executive Expatriate, Company B, Subsidiary

I didn't do anything for my family and I feel that I owe them a lot. My wife is working in China. Yeah, I have no choice... I want them to have a better life [silence for about 30 seconds] I found that no matter you are a leader or a general sales staff, the more successful career you have, the more sacrifice for your family. It's a natural law. If you spend more time on family then you will have less time on your career.

B4, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company B, Subsidiary

With only 24 hours in a day, it can be challenging for workers to balance their professional and personal lives. Respondent B4 emphasised the difficulty of achieving a work-life balance, particularly when work occupies a significant amount of time.

At Company A, there seemed to be some appreciation by the firm of the strain imposed by family separation. For example, there were cases of the Company stepping in to help expatriates' families in times of need. Respondent A15 described one such example,

During the frustrating [Covid] lockdown in Shanghai [in May 2022], my sister lacked food and other living materials. I reported this issue to the HQ and they sent noodles, meat, and vegetables and other essential materials to my sister's place within 2 hours! I am really grateful.

A15, Expatriate, senior manager, Company A, Subsidiary

However, even where such support was available, the strains of separation were increased by the uncertain duration of expatriate assignments. For the respondents to this research, in both companies, expatriation assignments were long, and could last anywhere from three to ten years. The one exception was A5, who had only been working overseas for three months (before the interview date). None of the research respondents had signed any formal contracts before expatriation and they were not told anything about the likely duration of the assignment at the outset. A silent rule in both companies was that expatriates had to stay in the assigned subsidiary for at least three years. As described by A4,

The company has no strict rules in terms of the length of the expatriation but there is an unwritten rule if you want to have ‘working overseas’ experience in your file, that it will be at least 3 years. So, in our company, 3 years is one tenure. Of course, it depends on different positions. If you are at an executive level, then it is 5 years. For the rest, senior and middle-level managers are 3 years. For grass-root staff, there are no official requirements. Just like I said, if you want to have ‘working overseas experience’ in your profile, then you need to work overseas at least for 3 years.

A4, Expatriate, Executive, Company A, Subsidiary

However, the end of an assignment in one country does not necessarily mean a return to China, as expatriates can be mobilised immediately or after a very short time to other countries by the HQ. Respondent B3 explained,

No, no, I didn’t sign any types of the contract before leaving China [...] I was supposed to stay in India longer, but I just stayed for 2 months and the HQ requested me to go to South Africa where I have been working until now [from 2015 to 2021 when interviewed] I felt that I was a puppet.

B3, Expatriate, Senior Manager, Company B, Subsidiary

This last comment suggests that the expatriate was acutely aware of their inability to exercise some agency over their work location and living arrangements. Set against a context where expatriate management was centralised and expatriates were selected by the HQs based on the needs of the company at any one time, it is easy to see how an individual might feel powerless and even dehumanised. Also, while abroad, the expatriate’s work records were closely tracked by the HQs, not only in order to examine workers’ performance but to also have information to facilitate their redeployment to subsidiaries in other countries in the future. As A7 said,

We need to know our expatriates’ performance overseas to evaluate whether they are capable to continue to handle other international assignments in the future.

A7, Senior Manager, Company A, HQ

The long term separation from family has serious social implications for expatriates and their families in both firms. Setting aside the exceptional case of A4 whose

family was with him, all other expatriates expressed, either explicitly or by silences and implication, that the relationship with their families had become more distant as a result of their expatriation. A8, Expatriate Senior Engineer, Company A, Subsidiary, said, "I broke up with my partner after working here for around 3 months." A similar situation applied in the case of A15 who broke up with his partner during his first international assignment. Respondents B1 and B6 explained their perspectives on expatriation and family disruption,

I know there are about 10 couples who have divorced after expatriation coming back to China, which might be shocking for you [the researcher]. But for me, this is just reasonable and kind of common. Imagine that two of us [an expatriate and her/his partner] were separated for years, and the most of time we [expatriates] were occupied by work ... how can we maintain the family marriage relationship? Some of us have already had children, I think children are probably one of the main reasons that couples are still together. Well, in China, we do everything for our children [...] I didn't get divorced from my wife, Thank God, and we had a son who is a very polite and handsome [laughing] ...but I feel extremely guilty for my wife, my son, my parents ... [silence for almost 2 minutes] ...especially for my wife. When I was working overseas, she took care of our son and educated him well. She also looked after my parents, especially when they were unwell.

B1, Vice President, Company B, HQ

The importance of silences in the interviews should not be underestimated. In earlier interviews the transcripts have noted silences of 20 seconds or 30 seconds. Bearing in mind that interviews were undertaken remotely, by phone, the weight of the silence is increased. A gap of many seconds is significant but in this interview it was even more marked. Two minutes during which the respondent was unable to speak was a long time. It is an indicator of the level of emotional stress being experienced by the respondent, particularly so in this case, but also in others.

B6 said,

I ended a 5-year-relationship with my partner in 2013. Well, we planned to establish our little family, but since I had to work overseas for many years, we decided to split up. I think that we could have had a happy family if I didn't need to work overseas for that many years. It was not easy for either of us, no ... [silence

for 30 seconds] ... I got married [with another woman] in 2016 and now we have a child.

B6, Repatriate Senior Engineer, Company B

Undoubtedly, the long years of family separation seriously challenged relationships. B11 admitted that he had a short-term affair with a female colleague when he was in Iran, although he had a family in Beijing who he later returned to. He said,

We [the female colleague and I] were living together for about half a year. I felt bad for my family, but I just did it. I feel ashamed of myself [silence for about 1 minute].

B11, Senior Repatriate Manager, Company B

A3 also experienced a serious challenge, and he stated,

We [my wife and I] had several severe arguments and some moment I thought our relationship would be over if we didn't have our two lovely sons. I owe my wife a lot...

A3, Repatriate, Project Director, Company A

While there were sometimes rare opportunities for senior employees in Company B to take their family with them on assignment, the opportunity was not always taken up, for very good reasons which B4 identified,

... although I can earn more in the UK, it is still hard to cover a family's expenditure here. And my wife did not want to come here because she does not speak English and she needed to look after both our parents in China ... our relationship is becoming distant.

B4, Expatriate, Senior Engineer, Company B, Subsidiary

This emotional hardship was very real. In the Chinese context, family is always prioritised, however, the finding showed that many respondents sacrificed their family to fully commit to their job. It is a paradox that work undertaken to enhance an individual's status, earnings and guanxi in the interests of family prospects, is the cause of family stress and breakdown.

In summary, this chapter has presented data on the incentives that expatriates enjoy alongside the hardships they endure. Monetary incentive is an important factor that drove expatriates to work overseas. The findings also reveal that guanxi played a role in expatriates' work and life in both companies. The evidence shows that respondents were aware of the hardships and felt them. Some even sounded traumatised by memories of their expatriation. While older and more senior respondents doubted that younger expatriates would accept the same conditions today, they continued to tolerate intensive working and family separation. In Chapter 8, these findings from Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are discussed and developed theoretically and considered in line with our understanding from the existing literature exploring expatriation and relevant theoretical approaches.

Chapter 8: Expatriate Pathways, Roles and Experiences: Finding and Making the 'Good Expatriate'

8.1 Introduction

The findings chapters have presented empirical data on the pathways, roles, experiences and motivations of expatriates in Companies A and B. The majority of research respondents are in operational or dual roles, reflecting the large numbers of technical and operational expatriates in Chinese MNCs more generally. Expatriates therefore play a variety of important roles in maintaining a stable workforce and ensuring the effectiveness of services to customers. The respondents to this research do not, however, conform to patterns of expatriate deployment in DMNCs. This chapter discusses the significance and implications of these findings from the perspective of the individual expatriate, while drawing broader theoretical insights in relation to the literature.

The discussion considers how a 'good expatriate' is made, whether and how it is possible for them exercise meaningful choice in their working (and non-work) lives, and how a more detailed understanding of their individual experiences can illuminate broader issues of Chinese HRM and global staffing. The discussion chapter falls into three main sections. First, in answering the question of how the expatriates in this study are managed, consideration is given to the targeted pathways of expatriation, in order to define who the 'good' expatriate 'is' and how they are deployed. Under this theme, expatriates' motivations in employment are discussed, alongside the influences that are brought to bear on their ideas about work, what roles they fulfil and how they are trained. Second, the implications for the expatriate of firm-bounded practices, from firm-assigned expatriation to corporate control of accommodation, are discussed. The third and final section considers the implications of the "double indeterminacy of labour" for expatriate understanding of their freedom to choose how they respond in their capital and operational roles. It also points to insights into the evolving nature of expatriation and Chinese HRM, in global context.

8.2 What Makes the Good Expatriate?

8.2.1 *Recruitment, Selection and Expatriate Motivations*

As leading firms in the international high-tech industry, Companies A and B each have a reputation for being demanding but prestigious employers. Respondents generally agree that the fame and reputation of these two firms motivated them to apply to work for them in the first place, bringing feelings of pride and honour, not only for themselves but also for their family. In addition to status and prestige, Companies A and B both provide attractive remuneration packages to recruit new staff and each offers earnings at higher-than-average levels, with Company A being recognised as the one of the highest-paying high technology companies in China.

As national champions, Companies A and B, are therefore in a position to exclusively target certain top Chinese universities with a science and engineering focus when recruiting pools of graduates. The companies each have long-term connections with such universities and vocational schools, through which they have access to a rich and sustainable workforce supply. The focus on engineering and science broadly fits the workforce demand in the Companies A and B and the steady supply of labour from these institutions is seen as a source of competitive advantage (Hoffman 2006). The Universities that supply these graduate recruits set high demands and strict rules for students, with a focus on being “self-disciplined” and in tune with the “harmonious society” championed in China. Some science and engineering universities, for example, also have strong associations with the military and there is a strong focus on order and loyalty.

Self-discipline and the capacity for dedication to work is a key desired characteristic in new graduates generally in China and is particularly salient at Companies A and B. For Chinese graduates, these two firms are excellent career choices. They provide better social platforms and material benefits compared to other companies, including others in the same high technology sector. Research respondents were very mindful of these opportunities especially since most of them were originally from middle- or lower-income families. The ambition to have a good job in a big firm and obtain a better standard of living and education by gaining a hukou in first-tier cities like Guangzhou or Shenzhen is a strong motivating factor that increases dependence on

the firm in relation to the pressure, opportunity and responsibility to earn well and enrich the wider family.

Alongside their technical ability, being 'self-disciplined' and technically trained (up to graduate level) means that new entrants are well prepared to be moulded by the corporate culture of Companies A and B – they have already been immersed in similar values through the education system, with limited interaction with the workplace or wider environment (see Hoffman 2006). Candidates with already embedded qualities of self-discipline are valued by their employers and the *guanxi* between Companies A and B and the Universities is close; their interests are in alignment because universities want to increase the student employment rate, while the companies want to hire their graduates. The name and known approach of the University is therefore taken not only as an indicator of educational achievement but also as an additional predictor of the new recruit's behaviour and attitude towards work. The use of such recruitment criteria is well cited in the literature (for example, Lin et al. 2012; Shen and Edwards 2004).

The insight gained from recruitment practices in Companies A and B is important, as little evidence could be found in either company of a set of additional or distinctive selection criteria that apply to the expatriate alone beyond a degree of fluency in a foreign language. The key attributes desirable in an expatriate – beyond technical skills – appear to be self-discipline and having trust relations with managers. Yet the latter are qualities desired of *all* employees. In Company B, expatriates are drawn from those already employed in accordance with standardised criteria, who have proven themselves to be trusted. Even though processes may appear more flexible in Company A, here again most respondents had gone through a standardised recruitment and selection process, prior to any expatriate assignment being confirmed. While their recruitment procedures are opening up more to direct expatriate applicants – and all applicants to Company A know in advance that expatriation may follow their appointment – in this study it was still the case that only one research participant (A2) had been directly recruited to a post in a subsidiary. She was a young ethnic Chinese graduate, already living in Germany, and it is interesting that she was also the only respondent to quit either of the employing companies during the research period. Her understanding of her mobility power allowed her to quite for better work-life balance.

In summary, all expatriates bar one in this study, began their pathway into expatriation through a standardised company recruitment process, with expatriate assignments being determined later at the discretion of the firm. There is evidence from Company A that some aspects of recruitment may be changing to allow more direct entrants for specific expatriate appointments. However, on the basis of the data from this study, in each company the process of expatriation begins with the recruitment of a cadre of self-disciplined, technically qualified employees who are already socially conditioned to accept expatriation either by the education system or prior experience of employment. With continuous access to such a highly qualified labour pool, both companies can rely on a firm-bounded recruitment strategy for expatriation.

8.2.2 Training and Preparation for Expatriation – and Repatriation

Once employed, the demands of Companies A and B are considerable. The key similarity of corporate culture at each firm is that each is explicitly customer-oriented, with little tolerance of poor performance or failure to meet targets. This high commitment to customer service is typical of the high technology sector's international norms in the context of intensely competitive markets. Companies A and B therefore combine corporate cultural control mechanisms with high targets linked to material, financial rewards and penalties (potentially dismissal) for poor performance. If an employee reaches their target goal and has a good annual evaluation, they receive an attractive financial reward, which may be particularly high in Company A. If workers fail to meet their targets they are liable to receive a poor evaluation from their managers and any employee graded as 'D' is vulnerable to dismissal, with all the financial and social disadvantage that would involve. Such rewards price other employers out of the market and it is difficult for workers to easily leave relatively high paying employment. Thus all respondents to this research were openly keen to perform well and keep their jobs.

Although all new graduate recruits at Companies A and B receive extensive induction into corporate values and technical training on entering employment, respondents had little or no training in the culture and practices of subsidiaries' host countries in preparation for expatriation. For more senior, managerial expatriates, the corporate approach to training needs is well-exemplified by the comments of Respondent B1,

who said that if a potential expatriate needed more than two weeks' *technical* training they were clearly not ready for expatriation. Arguably, this comment shows two things, first that training needs are primarily thought of as internal to the firm, both in ideological (cultural) and technical terms, and second, that any additional cross-cultural training is seen as redundant. In contrast, training in the corporate cultural approach to work and customer service is given close attention. The corporate values championed by Companies A and B – namely harmony, hard work, hardship tolerance, dedication, trust relations and self-discipline – are very much focused on. The high commitment demanded by both companies conforms to the high technology sector's norms in and managerial expectations more generally, while also being in tune with the expectations of China's centralised authoritarian state (Lee 2009; Cooke 2005; Ferner 1997; see also, Zheng and Smith 2019). Thus, an indication of what being self-disciplined actually means for managers in this study could be seen in the words of Respondent B2, when he commented on the possibility that local workers might go on strike if they disagreed with the company. His response was to describe them, critically, as "not disciplined". In this context, therefore, it can be assumed that for the corporation discipline means loyalty, compliance and hard work. It does *not* mean disagreement with management or the prioritisation of individual or collective interests of the worker over those of the company.

Daily working life for expatriates in Companies A and B is not only controlled by direct targets but also cultural control mechanisms – the WHS ethos and Party loyalty respectively – that are in some way linked to China's institutional and historical background (Lai 2016; Lai et al. 2020). These powerful ideological tools are utilised to influence workers' commitment and attitude towards their work and are applied to all employees, not exclusively to expatriates. In this research, as was the case in Lai et al's work (2020, p.661), Company A uses the WHS initiative to draw on "distinctive national and organizational contexts in China to construct, reinforce and reproduce a particular set of identities for employees". Thus the WHS system relies on corporate values entwined with tales of history and patriotism to create an image of an ideal worker which also defines a good expatriate. In Company B, China's historical context is also present in the use of Party loyalty as a cultural influence. In this there is a distant reference to the Cultural Revolution, when loyalty to the CPC

was prioritised even ahead of the objective of increasing the productivity of SOEs (Cooke 2008, pp. 293). Even though history is not directly referenced in Company B's rhetoric and documentation in the same way as it appears in the appeal to national memory and patriotism in Company A's WHS system, it is implicit in the demand for loyalty to the CPC.

In this way, the values and behaviours that each corporation expects of all employees are communicated. Mostly it was the case that expatriate research participants appeared to accept these values, which were communicated consistently from HQ to subsidiaries. There were, for example, many instances where respondents referred to themselves as "soldiers" in quite a casual way. They also spoke of the values of dedication and gave examples of hard work and self-discipline. However, in an example of how contradictions emerge from interview data, it was interesting that despite the occasional use of militaristic language, no respondent from either company directly referenced Chinese historical periods or the '100 years of humiliation' as an inspiration for their ways of thinking.

Corporate culture has concrete implications. The WHS system, for example, normalises the working of unpaid overtime. Furthermore, such is the social power and status of WHS that no respondent who had been invited to become a WHSP had refused, nor did any participant in this research know of anyone who had. Similarly, Party loyalty at Company B is influential in career progression and is also based on an *invitation* to move into more senior roles. Thus, the selection process for executive expatriates in Company B – and the state-owned sector more generally – is based on an invitation from senior managers. In practice, such an invitation is very difficult to refuse without adverse consequences for future career development. This is the same as for the invitation to become a WHSP. It follows that most respondents in senior roles at Company A have WHS status, while most respondents in executive positions at Company B are members of the Party, with their capital role extending to being an important agent of the politic of the Party to control the overseas subsidiaries. Figure 8.1 illustrates and summarises the expatriates' pathways into employment and expatriation.

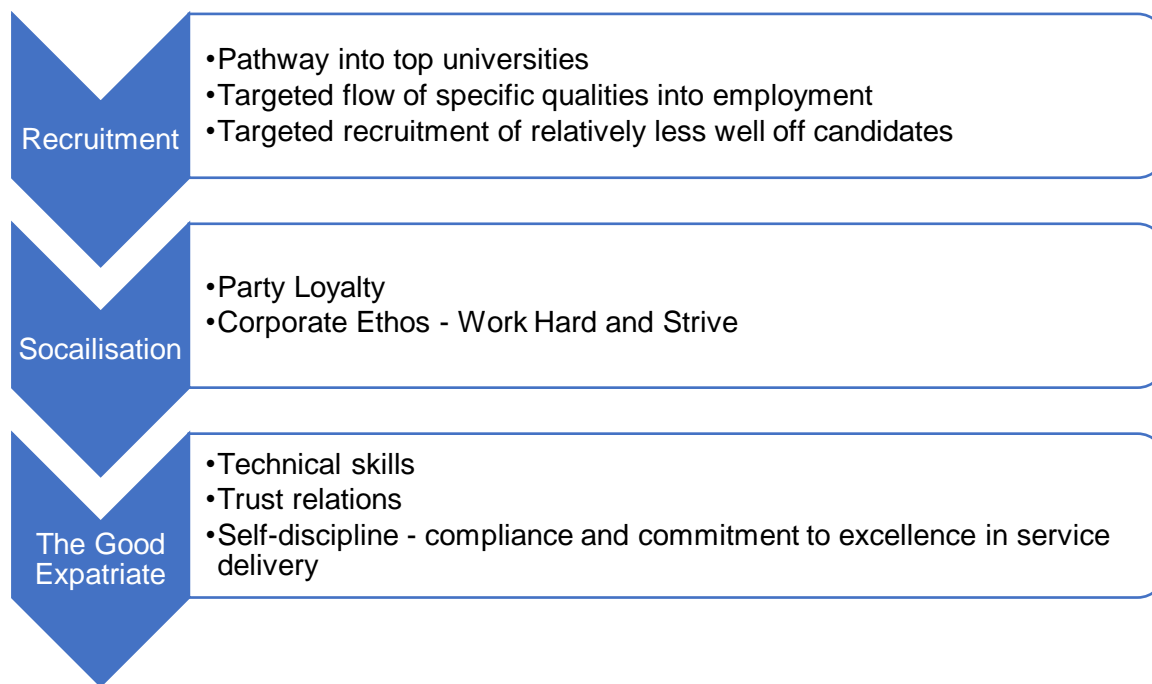


Figure 8.1 Pathways into Employment and Expatriation

The idea of expatriation as a phase of work that is somehow rewarded by promotion on repatriation, is not reflected in the findings of this study. Expatriates are likely to be repatriated or assigned new expatriate assignments at the discretion of their managers – sometimes individuals have an intervening period of work in China, while others do not. Of the nine respondents who had experienced repatriation, six of them said that they were largely left alone to deal with the demands of new job allocation and the possibility of another imminent international assignment. Therefore, after finishing challenging international assignment(s), repatriation could bring more uncertainty, with no training for re-adjustment to working life in China (or a new subsidiary), little choice over new work assignments and no support for family issues.

Shen and Edwards (2004) have argued that Chinese MNCs have largely neglected repatriation management and that this results in significant issues with work-life balance and strain (see also, Xiao and Cooke 2012). In this research, the findings from Companies A and B suggest that little has changed up to the present day (see also, for example, Xu 2020). Repatriates gradually have to take individual responsibility to relearn skills in China by ‘doing the work’ (Zhang and Fan 2014), repeating the self-adjustment they had gone through when first working in overseas subsidiaries. The example of B2, who was dispatched to South Africa in 2019 for his

second expatriation task (after three years back in China) illustrates the absolute authority that the company has to control and assign their workers. He really did not want to go and tried his best to refuse the new assignment, nevertheless, he had to comply. To a large extent this authority flows from China's domestic coercive control labour regimes, which allow Companies to demand compliance from their workers, whether they are domestic workers inside China, expatriates or repatriates.

Thus, firm-bounded practices of recruitment are followed by firm-level decisions on the assignment of expatriates, with training focused on operational skills and corporate cultural norms. While some research participants could be described as self-initiated expatriates, as they knew for certain that they would be assigned to a subsidiary after appointment, no expatriate apart from A2 knew *where* their expatriate assignment would be.

The companies each retain the decision-making power to deploy them as and where needed, across a range of emerging and mature economies. Respondents to this study – across both companies – said they had to find their own ways to gradually adjust themselves to the expatriate assignment and also the return to China, while accepting real hardship without complaint (for other studies of expatriate readjustment, see Andreason and Kinneer 2005; Selmer and Luring 2015). Respondents voiced a range of emotions such as disappointment, anger, and vulnerability, often followed by words which suggest a high sense of dependence on the firm, “I do not have much choice, I have to do it”.

The lack of preparation either for initial expatriation or return to China suggests that expatriates are being regarded as internationally mobile workers on the basis of their technical skills. They are deployed in line with corporate demand for skills, roles, tasks and activities but largely without regard for cultural sensitivity to the distinctive institutional framework or cultural norms of their assigned location. Their roles and pattern of career development support the interpretation of the Chinese expatriate as a member of a fully diverse operational and managerial workforce that is internationally deployed according to business needs.

8.2.3 Roles Fulfilled by Expatriates and Career Development

When expatriates arrive at subsidiaries, they join large numbers of fellow expatriates and fulfil a range of roles, encompassing every type of activity from operational (labour) to senior managerial (capital) functions. Theory on expatriation in DMNCs has concentrated on the ways in which expatriates engage in knowledge transfer, communication and cultural influence in subsidiaries, with a focus on home versus host country influence, along with diffusion and reverse diffusion of HR practices (Edwards et al. 2017; Harzing 1999, 2001b). The findings from this study confirm that that concentration on the managerial or capital role is not appropriate for understanding the Chinese expatriate role or experience.

For more junior expatriates in Companies A and B, their operational role is of primary importance. With years of expatriation come higher levels of seniority and managerial roles and responsibilities, but these are not promotions given as a 'reward' on return to China in recognition of dedication to an expatriate assignment. On the contrary, the findings show that repatriated respondents do not receive promotion on return to China and in actual fact several felt their careers had suffered, especially from the loss of *guanxi* involved in relocation. Nevertheless, working abroad is an expected part of career development and expatriate respondents at Companies A and B each understood that they were an important part of their company's global workforce. While promotion is not guaranteed, the current literature suggests that overseas experience is a good mark on Chinese expatriates' career records, which can be beneficial for their future promotions (for example, Selmer and Luring 2015) and this was borne out by this study. However, there appears to be more nuance in what happens along the career path. While expatriation *does* seem to be essential for progression, it is not a straightforward process of promotion in *return* for undertaking an international assignment. Rather, there appears to be progression into dual and sometimes more senior managerial roles *as part of* the expatriation assignment.

Junior expatriates are likely to commence in an operational role and gradually take on more supervisory and managerial responsibilities. This study found, for example, that new expatriates are supervised by more experienced expatriates when they arrive at the subsidiary. From a social function perspective, these relatively more

experienced expatriates partially embody the capital function; while they provide moral support for new arrivals, they are also responsible for the “control and surveillance of labour” (Zheng and Smith 2019). This form of supervision ensures that expatriates are guided to work in a particular way to increase their productivity and ultimately meet targets. In addition and with time, expatriates also develop specialist experience and *guanxi* in subsidiary settings, which firms are keen to maintain through relatively lengthy periods of expatriation. In this way, there is segmentation of different roles which evolve as expatriates incrementally fulfil a dual function on the pathway to more senior managerial functions. In other words, the social functions of expatriates in this study appear to be fluid, with movement through and between roles according to capability and experience.

While respondents said that a majority of key senior positions in subsidiaries were held by Chinese expatriates, the findings also show that respondents had the capacity to enforce centralised product and process rules from more junior operational positions. This is highlighted, for example, in the case of Respondent B4, whose strong advice not to short-cut company protocols was eventually followed – perhaps reluctantly – by his Director, who was a host-country employee. This is an interesting example, because not only did a junior member of the team feel empowered to enforce a company rule, the senior colleague was sufficiently mindful of the expatriate’s knowledge of HQ’s expectations to comply. The coordinating and controlling functions of expatriates seen here are similar to practices in Japanese MNCs (see Yoshihara 2004; Whitley et al. 2003), which also rely heavily on expatriates in their overseas subsidiaries (Legewie 2002). However, the key difference in Chinese subsidiaries appears to be the scale of the labour function in expatriation – there are many more technical and operational firm-bounded expatriates in Chinese MNCs. Therefore, in the example noted, it can be seen that even at the operational level expatriates could be extremely effective enforcers of HQ rules and procedures.

Beyond managing compliance with product and process rules, the capital role fulfilled by research respondents focused mainly on maintaining a consistent set of values and behaviours in expatriates themselves. Direct control over expatriate respondents is exercised through rules, procedures and targets in the context of powerful ideational corporate cultural messaging. The result is that expatriates could

be said to experience the same sort of working regime as though working in China. This is reinforced by legal employment issues. Taking UK as an example - Chinese expatriates working in the UK have their terms and conditions governed by Chinese laws and regulations, separate from those of the host country. These expatriates often fall under the category of "intra-firm transferees," which means their work in the UK is related to their employment with the parent company based in China, and their visa status is also different from traditional migrant workers. Thus, despite working in the UK, Chinese expatriates are not classified as migrants according to UK law. They have restricted access to the UK labour market and are confined to specific roles within their designated organization. Should they lose their employment or face unfavourable circumstances, they may be required by UK authorities to return to China. Recent changes in UK immigration rules²⁵ have granted employers new and significant control over the working lives of expatriates, further impacting the rights and experiences of Chinese expatriates in the UK (see Zheng and Smith 2019, p.496). These legal complexities are not restricted to the UK. Immigration rules and visa regulations create a challenges for Chinese expatriates as they navigate their professional and personal lives in a foreign country. In particular, their mobility is constrained by legal instruments.

These circumstances increase the expatriate's dependence on their home country. Arguably, the main difference for the expatriate is that they comply with Chinese regulation and corporate norms in the more enclosed and intensive environment of the subsidiary, where dependency on the firm and isolation from other influences may increase the potential for compliance. In this respect, expatriates in Company A and B may be regarded as part of a workforce that is managed to a set of consistent set of institutional regulations and corporate norms, even if deployed internationally.

Other studies have also cited strong centralised control in MNC subsidiaries, acting as a tool of integration and coordination to "reduce uncertainty" and enhance "predictability" (Lai 2016, p.35). While consistency is maintained in the management

²⁵ Under the new immigration policy, intra-firm transferees are no longer eligible to apply for permanent residence in the UK after working continuously for three years. This change in the policy has effectively excluded this category of foreign workers from the pathway to obtaining permanent residency in the country.

of the expatriate workforce and the delivery of high service levels to customers, the findings revealed far less energy being targeted on changing host country working practices beyond requiring strict compliance with product and process rules. The main focus of the capital role appeared to be maintaining the values, commitment and work ethic of the Chinese expatriates themselves. Host country workers, for example, were able to comply with their own norms of working hours and holidays. Indeed, ethnic Chinese born in host countries were similarly exempt from the conditions being worked by expatriates from mainland China, to the extent that a British born Hong Kong Chinese employee was unsure what the WHS system was. Thus, in this study it was Mainland Chinese expatriates who worked holidays, weekends and around the clock to provide the 007 service the firms promise their customers. The implications of the external institutional framework for working conditions were therefore side-stepped by deploying sufficient numbers of operational expatriates working to corporate norms in the subsidiary. For them, the subsidiary functions almost as a 'space of exception' where only corporate rules apply. Furthermore, no participant in this study expressed concern that labour laws in the host country might prevent them working as many hours as the company deemed necessary to complete a task.

In this context, while the norms, values and work ethic of host country employees might be a significant irritant for their expatriate colleagues, it becomes less crucial to the firm in relation to customer service and company success. In Companies A and B, the large number of expatriates ensure the subsidiaries run in accordance with corporate norms. However, this is not a crude cost cutting exercise or the substitution of cheaper Chinese labour for more expensive locals. In reality, local workers may be far cheaper than Chinese expatriates. Rather, the high use of operational expatriates seems to be more about maintaining stability, standardisation and performance across subsidiaries.

On the basis of these findings, it becomes possible to picture the 'good expatriate'. While recognising there may be sectoral effects involved, and acknowledging the small scale of this research study, three themes can be identified. First, that the good expatriate is expected to be technically competent and accepting of corporate culture, but is *not* required or encouraged to be integrated with the host country's culture. In practice, expatriates are segmented from host country employees – one of

the clearest examples of the divide between them is company expectations of hours of work. Second, career development from operational into capital roles may begin with dual responsibilities as part of an expatriation assignment. Third, the expatriate is dependent on the firm for social and economic status, and this is heightened by the isolation and intensive working environment of the subsidiary. Figure 8.2 summarises what a good expatriate is in this context.



Figure 8.2 Features of the 'Good Expatriate'.

The next section considers the implications of these insights for the experience of expatriation, including the double indeterminacy of labour (Smith 2006), the individual experiences of hardship and the capacity for individuals to imagine different alternatives and choices in their work and non-working lives.

8.3 Experiencing Expatriation: Integration, Isolation and Freedom to Choose?

Expatriates know that they can be moved anywhere in the world to fulfil their operational and capital roles, in line with the international expansion and mobility of their firms. Yet when interviewed, repeated references by respondents to “having no choice” suggested that they felt their own *lack* of mobility power in many ways. The majority of respondents could not seem to imagine an alternative to intensive working or the hardships of being far away from their families, for a range of personal

and socio-economic reasons. The following sub-sections consider how individuals' understanding of how their mobility power was bounded by company controlled accommodation, material rewards and penalties, and family considerations.

8.3.1 Isolation and Accommodation

Dormitory labour regimes have been studied as places of labour subjugation and control of workers in industries such as garments (Kim 2016; Siu 2015) and again in construction (Fei 2020). In one form or another, corporate controlled accommodation was the way all respondents in this study lived. While even respondents working in Europe lived quite close to one another, especially where respondents were living in conflict zones or relatively challenging climates, corporate accommodation was generally portrayed (and experienced) as a place of safety. Several respondents referred to frightening experiences, especially in conflict zones and countries with less developed health and welfare provision, where the 'safety issue' was used by companies as justification for separate accommodation (Smith and Pun 2006; Lee 2009; Fei 2020). There are undoubtedly situations where personal security is at risk and environments are severe, as evidenced by research participants. In such environments, compound living can help expatriates overcome these safety issues and allow them to socialise safely and share their feelings with one another.

However, evidence suggests that, irrespective of any safety considerations, compound living also makes it easier for companies to manage and control their expatriates by isolating them from the support from host countries' "official institutions" or "through personal or family networks" (Fei 2020, p.21). For example, quite apart from the different working patterns which (in this study) were found to distinguish the Chinese expatriate from their host-country colleagues, Company A has been seen to discourage any deep emotional connections with host country nationals. The example of how they 'informally' let it be known that any marriage between an expatriate and host-country national would be a betrayal of the corporation, is a case in point.

Accordingly, respondents to this study explained that their lives are mostly occupied by work, with very limited social life. While expatriated, the majority of respondents seem to exist as part of a small social group of colleagues, all working and living together. This reflects the disembeddedness of the Chinese expatriate that is

referred to in the literature (for example Gonzalez-Vicente 2019; Cooke 2012; Smith and Zheng 2016; Zheng and Smith 2019). As this study collected data from the experiences of individuals, there are limitations on the extent to which a comment can be made on whether Companies A and B provide examples of spatial politics in the labour management of expatriates as opposed to host country employees (see Fei 2020). However, the findings indicate clearly the lack of cultural integration of the expatriate with the cultural environment of their host country and the ways in which alternative possibilities are bounded by the constraints of work.

This sort of isolation suggests there is a rationale behind the limited cross-cultural training expatriates receive pre-departure. While expatriated, most of the employees of Company A and B will live in dormitories or compounds largely separated from the society and customs of the subsidiary's host country. It could be argued they inhabit a piece of China abroad. This has some benefits for the individual, in the sense that living in the same accommodation develops their collaboration and reliance on one another and helps the process of adapting to being overseas more easily – a good example mentioned by research participants was their ability to get good, familiar Chinese food, for example. However, such a closed work and social environment can prevent meaningful adaptation to the local environment and hinder expatriates' ability to deal with local staff. In other studies, expatriates in sectors outside the high-tech sector have been shown to interact with their external environment, such as the Chinese expatriates in Zheng and Smith's study (2019, p.496-497) whose conditions were influenced by engagement with a local trade union in Italy. In the present study, however, the external environment did not appear to impinge on respondents in any location. This may be a sectoral effect, as the high technology sector is, as Zheng and Smith (2019) have shown, exceptional in its persistent use of firm-bounded practices.

For research participants in this study, the boundaries of the working day blur with the accommodation they inhabit – effectively they are immersed in an environment where work and leisure mingle. Informal socialisation mechanisms (Govindarajan and Fisher 1990; Rowe and Wright 1997) flow seamlessly from the working day into non-working time, in a range of different ways. A concrete example of how this plays out may be seen in the way that respondents explained that the 996 configuration of working hours and days in China, had been transformed into a 007 work pattern in

their subsidiaries. This was particularly noticeable during the fieldwork, in the period of the technology trade war between China and the United States. Facing external threat, respondents from both companies had to react promptly to retain existing customers and accelerate scientific research, hoping to ultimately help their companies survive the crisis and keep their jobs. The photograph of a watch telling the time of a work shift that finished at 05.05 a.m. testifies to the impact this had on the working day. Respondents' comments suggested that there were no boundaries around working time and this was borne out in the fieldwork. It became extremely difficult to speak to individuals for very long at the height of this period. Arguably, the experience of crisis reinforced expatriates' sense of being isolated and strengthened their understanding of their social obligations as workers battling against external forces.

A similarly intensive working culture is common in China, particularly in big high technology firms such as Company A, where 24/7 service is explicitly embedded in the firm's approach to management. Though Company B is not so explicit in emphasising a 24/7 working culture, the intensity of the working day is similar. Here there are echoes of Fei's (2020; 2021) findings and Lai's (2016) thesis, where it is shown that expatriates in the high technology sector are still managed differently and are not integrated with host country workers. This brings the discussion to matters of work intensity as a feature of the so-called Chinese capacity for hardship tolerance.

8.3.2 Work Intensity, Emotional Cost, Material Rewards and Sanctions

Intensive working patterns have been used to justify the reputation of Chinese workers as the hardest working people in the world, and the claim that they tolerate different types of hardship to a larger extent than others (for example, Rui et al. 2017). However, in interpreting results from this research, it was necessary to bear in mind China's intensely competitive labour market (Cooke 2005; Lee 2009; Gallagher and Dong 2011; Zheng and Smith 2019). In contrast to Fei's (2021, p. 675) reference to the high turnover of expatriates, the respondents to this study were very keen to hold on to their jobs. As Company A and also Company B are market leaders and the highest 'payers' in the high technology sector, where intensive working practices are the norm, respondents were very much aware that were they to quit or be dismissed for failure to meet company targets, the alternative would probably involve working in

another firm but with less income attendant loss of social status and power (see Wright Mills, 1951, 2002, pp. 229-235)..

The general income of employees in Companies A and B is higher than other firms in the same sector, with Company A being renowned for its higher pay even among respondents from Company B. This is one of the main motivations for research respondents wishing to stay in their jobs. In this context the need to make their targets and minimise the risk of job loss was a consistent concern for research participants and the performance evaluation system in both companies accelerates the race among workers to survive. Quitting or being dismissed from a 'decent job' in Company A or B, means the loss of stable well-paid income, the loss of guanxi (in the Chinese technology networking sector) and the loss of an income to benefit their family's future. The majority of respondents who were from relatively poor families and also had their own family to raise would not take such a risk. Their income took top priority. The loss of employment would lead to a severe economic problem for their families, which would be an unbearable cost that outweighed the hardships of work intensity and being away from relatives and friends for lengthy periods.

Just one expatriate A4²⁶ in this study was accompanied by his family. Although expatriate assignments often last many years (3 years was said to be the minimum by respondents but no clear end date is given to respondents) any potential disruption to the expatriate's family is barely acknowledged by the firms. This is in contrast to DMNCs' efforts at socialising expatriates and taking care of their family needs and repatriation processes (for example, Dowling and Welch 2004). Apart from one example where a respondent's family had been taken food by company staff in China during Covid lockdowns, research participants said that little was done for them in terms of family support or repatriation training.

As an example of the dislocation that expatriation involves, children might get to see their expatriated parent once – or at most twice – in a year. Here it is also possible to see the potential implications for the gendered dimensions of expatriation. The overwhelming majority of expatriates in this study were male. There were only two, relatively young female respondents in this study and both were childless during

²⁶ As noted, A4's wife is an expatriate working in a Chinese bank subsidiary.

expatriation. It is not possible to generalise from a small study but the structure of expatriation may inhibit female applicants. Among married couples in this study, the male partner's wife was generally fulfilling the social reproductive obligations of child and elder care back in China, thereby facilitating male expatriation within a family. For example, respondent A3's wife had also worked in Company A but resigned after their first son was born and became a housewife. A3 explained they agreed that it would be better for her to stay at home in China taking care of their children and he continue to work in the company. This was described as a relatively common solution to the issue of family care and goes some way to explaining why expatriation is male dominated more generally.

The predictable infidelities and affairs that ensue between expatriates who are forced together while isolated from others, are reported in the findings as a source of shame by several respondents. In addition to heterosexual relationships, respondents made indirect references to homosexual affairs. Those respondents who had not come out to their friends and family in China as gay, said that keeping such secrets hidden in the innermost recesses of their hearts while working to an exhausting schedule increased their sense of loneliness. For them, as well as those others involved in heterosexual affairs, having someone close to rely on overseas was described as probably one of the best ways to release internal negative emotions. The emotional wellbeing and sex life of expatriates is an area of research that would benefit from being paid more attention in future studies. This study is not attempting to comment on extra-marital relationships from an ethical or moral high-ground. Rather, these issues are highlighted as indicators of the severe spillover and consequences for family relationships as a result of the isolation of the expatriate during their overseas assignments.

It is hardly surprising that following repatriation, respondents said that marriage breakdown is common. They cited these same issues as causes of 'hardship' and personal distress, which came to the surface in several interviews. The concept of family is embedded deeply in Chinese society and most people believe that 'harmony at home brings prosperity' (家和万事兴). This is a viewpoint that is especially dear to the older generation. Therefore, in China, the break-up of a marriage is more than the end of the relationship between two people, but rather one that has an enormous impact on two families, involving the custody of children and

the division of properties. If the family breaks down, children typically lose contact with their paternal family of origin.²⁷ Thus, while divorce imposes strain on people anywhere in the world, in China the breakdown of a marriage is still relatively remarkable, with social stigma attached. In interviews, most respondents expressed feelings of guilt towards their neglect of their family, regretting the time they lost with them while working outside China. They regretted not being able to see their children growing up and not being able to look after their parents. In the face of all these emotional hardships, most expatriates in this study relied on the explanation of a lack of mobility power – of having “no choice” – but to do the right thing for their families by earning well, which required them to do the right thing for their employing firm, by meeting their targets and keeping their jobs.

In summary, expatriates were often proud to share their experiences of the company’s intensive working regime both inside China and in overseas subsidiaries, while also speaking of loneliness, regret and shame about many aspects of their family and personal relations. In interviews many internal contradictions emerged, which complicate evaluation of the extent to which expatriates fully embrace an identity that reflects the organisational culture of ‘harmony, hard work and hardship tolerance’ they are working in. However, there were two common themes: first, all respondents cared deeply about keeping their job and second, there was a recurrent theme of “limited choice” when interviewees spoke of any possible alternatives to expatriation.

8.4 What Insights Can be Derived from Individual Experiences for Expatriation and Chinese HRM?

In the IHRM literature on expatriation, *expatriates* are defined as “expensive people in crucial positions” (Brewster et al. 2014, p. 1921). They are expensive because their training, skills and expertise demand financial reward and corporate support during expatriation. The picture that emerges in this study of Chinese expatriates does not match that definition. Rather, for research respondents, standard technical skills are the firm’s main training focus (see also Fei 2021), while operational and

²⁷ The impact of expatriation on children would, in my view, make an excellent focus for future research.

capital roles develop and merge in real time, frequently during (or as a part of) expatriate assignments.

Arguably, the absence of cross-cultural training is an important window into how the employing firms view the process of expatriation and labour management in subsidiaries. First, it indicates that neither Company A or B necessarily *value* the integration of expatriates with local culture or institutions and second, it suggests that expatriates are intended to fulfil a clearly defined purpose which does not *necessitate* cross-cultural integration. Their purpose encompasses technical operational and capital roles, which are fluid and evolve with the length, experience and incidences of expatriate assignments, sometimes interspersed with periods of work in China, with many hardships along the way, as illustrated in Figure 8.3.

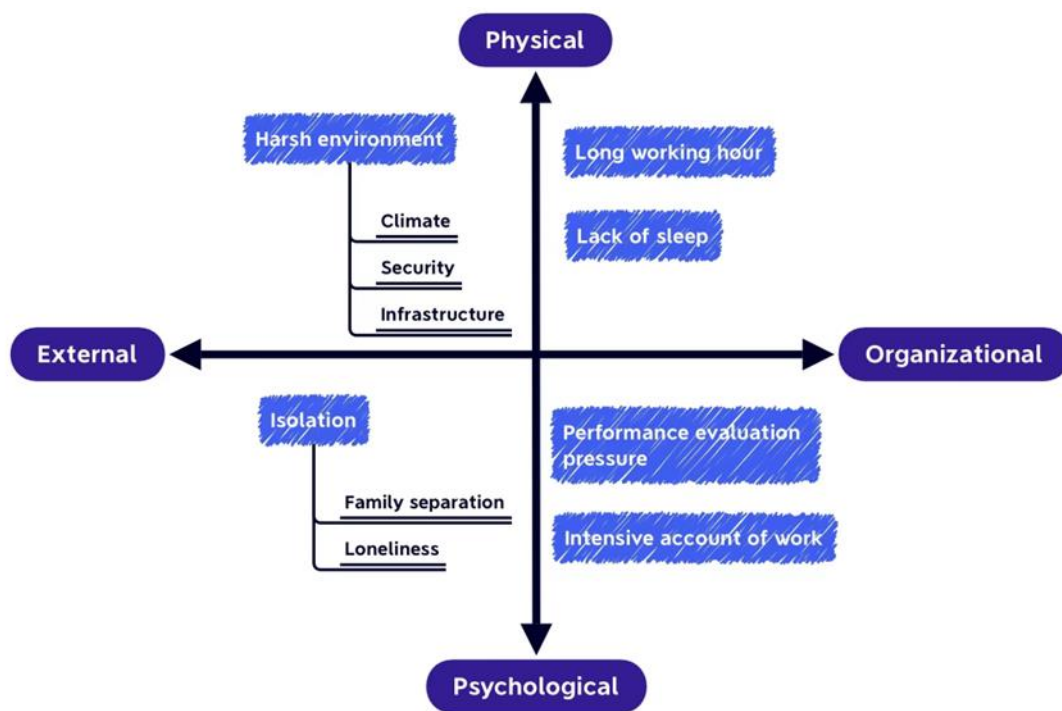


Figure 8.3 The Hardships of Expatriation

Lai et al. (2020), for example, have suggested that cultural forces and a sense of identity may explain how Chinese expatriates reconcile themselves to the many hardships of expatriation and intensive working. Their argument proposes that expatriates choose to “eat bitterness” as part of their identity and contribution to the success of China as a harmonious society and as a response to the “hundred years of humiliation”. No respondents in the present study mentioned ancient Chinese

history or Confucian thought on harmony as the origin or motivation for their behaviour. However, the sense of being a group of embattled workers was very apparent during early stages of the US-China trade war in 2019-2020. Around this time interviewees expressed their sense of honour working in companies they saw as part of the development of China in the global economy. They also resented what they saw as unfair treatment by the US. Their sense of Chinese identity was surely part of their thinking. However, perhaps this is not the 'whole story', as many contradictions emerged from interview responses in this research.

For example, at Company A, while respondents generally accepted the WHS ethos and were proud of their achievements, they simultaneously complained of the exhaustion they experienced as a result of the intensity of their work. This set up internal tensions for some respondents in their dual and capital roles, because as embodiments of both capital and labour functions (Zheng and Smith 2019) they had to inspire other employees to work hard and strive. Respondent A4 was a case in point, expressing his personal experience of exhaustion at the same time as acknowledging the influence of the WHS culture and the way he used it to manage other employees. Furthermore, while the tensions involved in being morally compelled to make a voluntary commitment – like becoming a WHSP – may be becoming more common inside China (Hoffman 2006), refusal to make the commitment to WHS is still likely to have a negative impact on employees' career development and all expatriates in Company A knew this. This includes chances for promotion, bonus and the *guanxi* with superiors. Some other Chinese companies have seen what Company A is doing and have stated their intention to reference this particular culture and practice to stimulate greater employee commitment to their company. Such plans have been criticised by commentators who point out that Company A is a leader in pay and benefits in China, and suggest that companies who want their own versions of WHS should offer similar levels of salary and bonus.

Refusal of the WHS invitation was unthinkable to research participants, yet the promise of bonuses cannot cure all. Findings highlighted that the interviewees felt discontent, anger, and grievance over the hardships they endured at times even though they did not express such feelings openly. In other words, they gave the *appearance* of hardship tolerance (Rui et al. 2017; Lee 2017). All but two respondents felt impotent to turn resentment into any form resistance, including

quitting or threatening to quit. There is a surface harmony here but this would not conform to the concept of Confucian harmony (Danford and Zhao 2012) which advocates various opinions and interests should find a way to harmoniously co-exist. Rather, the absence of open conflict seems to be a pragmatic response to conditions where other any options seem constrained.

In this research, the impotence expressed in the language of “having no choice” was the product of several inter-relating factors. Family responsibilities, the need and desire to “keep the job”, a coercive labour control regime and sectoral norms of high performance each played a part (see also Lee 2009; Cooke 2005). As such, interview responses do not reveal a scenario where individual expatriates ‘positively welcome hardship’. Rather, they expressed, privately, a great deal of antagonism towards their situation at times, but felt unable to speak up, largely because suitable and acceptable alternatives did not seem within their reach.

Drawing these findings together, the relative isolation of expatriates in subsidiaries is a key aspect of their experience of the complex mix of coercive management, intensive corporate socialisation, cross-cultural ignorance and spatial isolation that defines the experience of the majority of respondents, in international locations where the pressures of home and work collapse together. The physical distance from China, plus the pressures to succeed and the high socio-economic consequences of failure, are all part of the ingredients for the expatriate’s compliance with corporate control. Figure 8.4 summarises the influences that respondents cited, indicating the complex interplay of multiple factors that they felt limited their options.

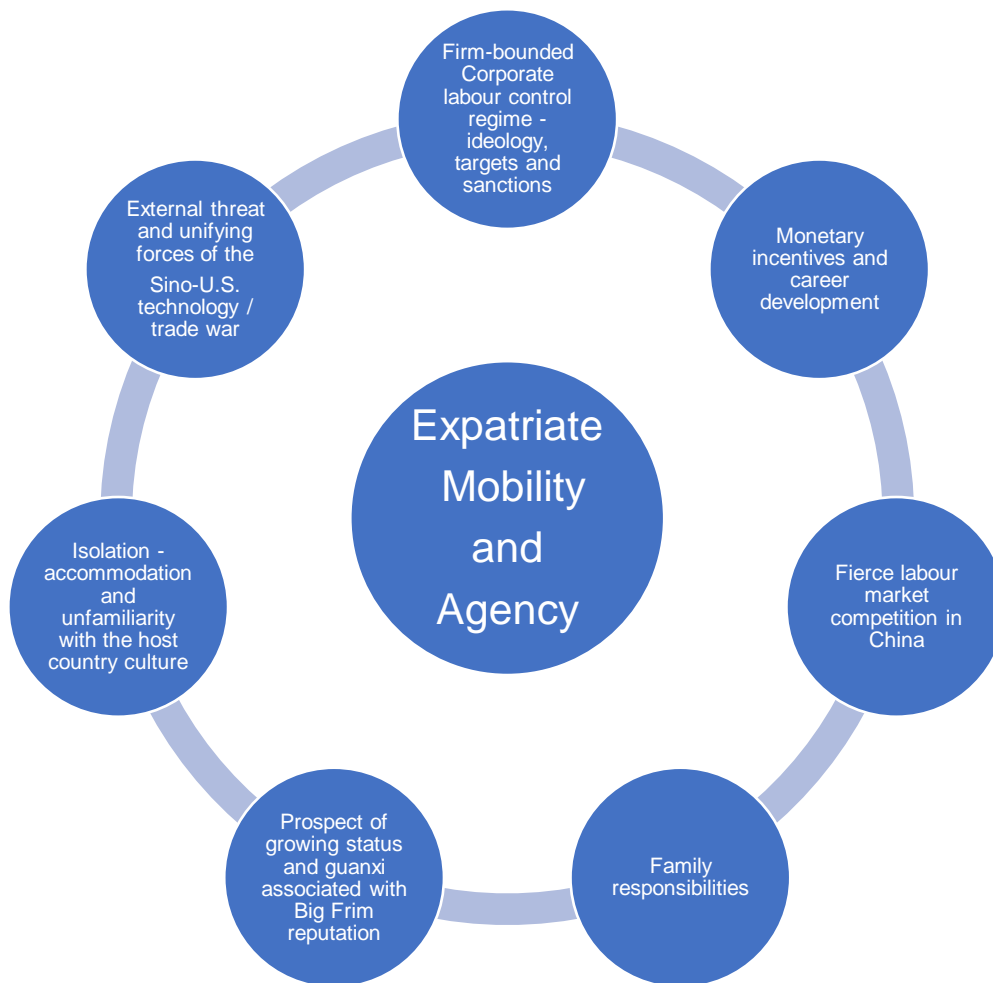


Figure 8.4 The Boundaries of Expatriate Mobility and Agency

8.5 Conclusion

Most expatriates in this study held operational positions or filled a dual role. Thus, Companies A and B used a firm-bounded recruitment strategy to deploy an extensive number of expatriates to subsidiaries, where operational and capital roles interact and overlap, to some extent. The implications of such an expatriation strategy are that firm-bounded processes protect ways of working from external challenges and allow the corporate work ethos applying in China HQ to be replicated in overseas subsidiaries. The companies set a solid ideology of ‘the right way to work’ and ‘what a good employee is’ for their expatriates, whether they be assigned operational or capital roles. The expatriates in this sample generally complied with the conditions laid down by the firm. The rewards they gained in terms of income and social status appear to be powerful motivating factors for compliance. However, the understanding of this behaviour as a ‘Chinese’ characteristic should be tempered with an understanding of what the respondents said about the calculations they make in

relation to alternative courses of action. There are echoes of the work of C.Wright Mills (1951, 2002) and his description of frames of acceptance (skill, income, power and status) identified among middle class workers in the US. Yet unlike his subjects, the expatriates in this study could not generally find relief in leisure outside work, and mostly they did not express 'satisfaction' with their lives. Rather it was a resignation to limited agency and an awareness of the limits of the options open to them.

In addition, all expatriates are communicators of strong centralised rules to minimise uncertainty. The influence of this strategy must be understood in its sectoral context, in line with the norms of the high technology sector, which has been identified as exceptional in its continued adherence to strictly firm-bounded practices (Zheng and Smith 2019). In the following concluding chapter, the significance of these findings is summarised.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This dissertation is a qualitative micro-study of individual Chinese expatriates in two leading Chinese high technology telecommunication MNCs. Repeated interviews with a total cohort of 27 respondents over time revealed the expatriates' own ideas and interpretations of their roles, responsibilities and experiences. The findings provide insights into expatriation and Chinese HRM more generally, always allowing for the research limitations imposed by the small scale of this study. This chapter draws the study to a close and summarises its potential theoretical and empirical contributions.

9.1 Summary of the Study

Much research on Chinese MNCs to date has concentrated on expatriation practices in labour-intensive sectors, such as mining and construction (e.g. Rui et al. 2019; Lee 2017). Relatively less focus has been devoted to expatriation in the high technology sector, though this is now changing (for example, Fei 2021; Lai et al. 2020). The high technology communications sector is fast growing and a major force in the development of China. It is also exceptional in its continued high reliance on firm-bounded recruitment and firm assigned expatriation (Zheng and Smith 2019). As a national champion in China, it offers an interesting site for research into the expatriate experience.

Country-of-origin western interpretations of expatriation in DMNCs do not explain the high use of operational expatriates typical of Chinese MNCs. Low-cost labour substitution does not explain the strategies of high utilization of technical operational expatriates fulfilling a labour function. One of the methods called for in exploring how Chinese firms actually manage their workers, is to undertake more micro-studies (for example, Cooke 2012, 2020; Smith and Zheng 2016; Zhu and Wei 2014). This study was conceived of as a response to those calls. It was designed as a long-term, exploratory study, with the intention to speak to expatriates as freely as possible, without the firm acting as an influence during the process of research. It aimed to learn about expatriate experiences of their working regimes and, if possible, to use the experiences of individual workers to derive broader insights into Chinese HRM. A social relations approach (see Zheng and Smith 2019) was used as a broad theoretical framework for organising and understanding the expatriate experience in

terms of collective labour and capital roles. Figure 9.1 illustrates the sectoral context for the study and key factors that emerge in the context of China.

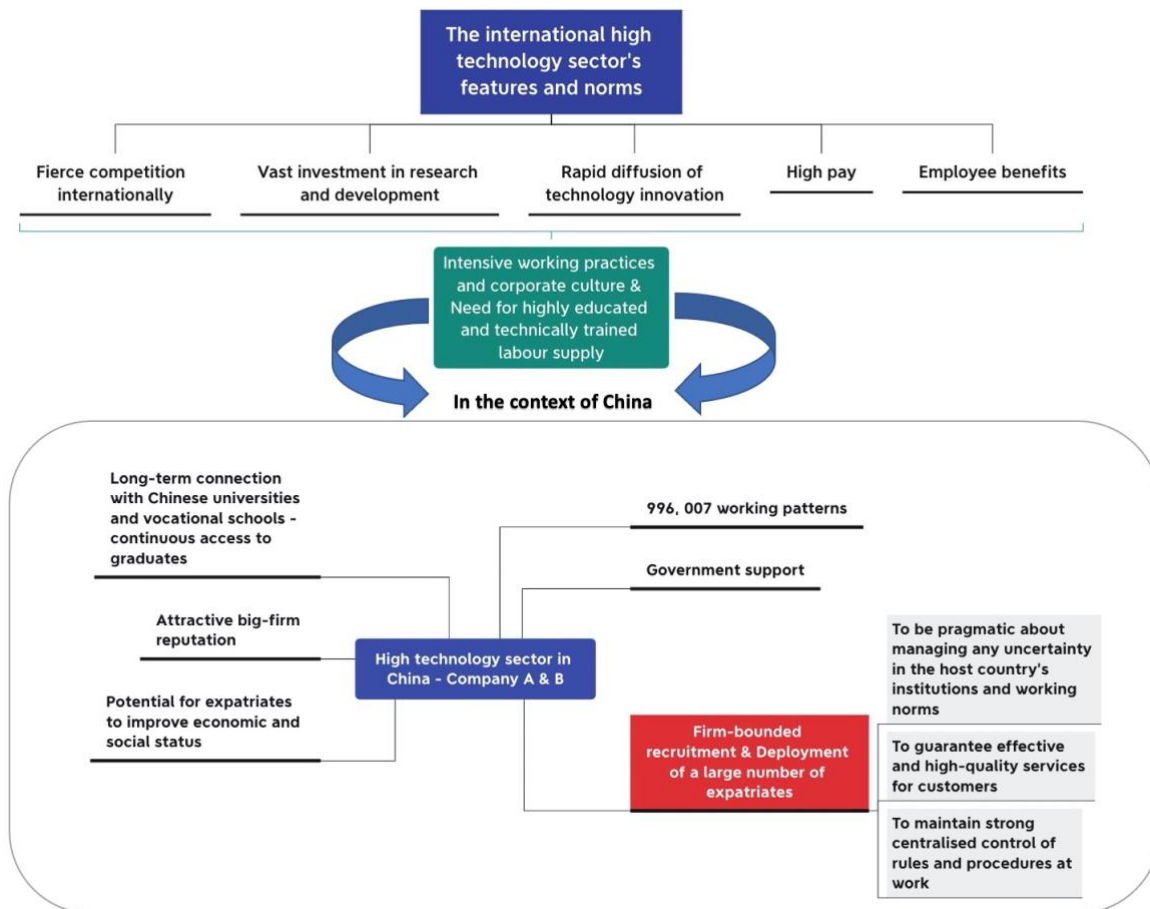


Figure 9.1 Expatriation Pathways in the Chinese High Technology MNCs

9.1.1 Experiencing Expatriation

Most of the respondents to this research fulfil a collective labour function (operational role) or a dual role, where capital and labour functions overlap. Chinese MNC HQs are renowned for exerting strong centralised control. The utilisation of high numbers of operational and dual role expatriates allows for a pragmatic approach to the management of host-country employees. In this study, it appears that it allows the side-stepping of host-country institutions on employment rights such as maximum working hours through the substitution of local labour by expatriates dedicated to operational roles.

The pathways into expatriation and repatriation for research participants were firm-bounded and research respondents generally say they do not feel able to choose or

refuse either the location or timing of expatriate assignments. Career progression into dual roles combining managerial and operational responsibilities is part of the flow of expatriation and repatriation. Experience in subsidiaries is generally understood to be desirable for progression into senior management. However, among research participants, it was the case that dual and senior managerial roles evolved through the timeline of expatriation and repatriation, rather than being a 'reward' for a specific expatriate assignment.

Working conditions for research respondents are intensive, with many hardships, such as open-ended periods of expatriation, corporate controlled accommodation and dislocation of family relationships. Training is technically focused alongside much concentration on corporate culture. However, aside from the targeted recruitment of candidates socially conditioned by education and work experience to be "self-disciplined", the main focus of the firm is the expatriate's technical ability and trustworthiness. There is little or no cross-cultural training, and integration with host country employees is not encouraged (see also Fei 2020).

The long duration of expatriate assignments, the intensity of work, lack of integration with the host country and separation from family, all contribute to the isolation of individuals during their assignments. This was the cause of silent grievance and private guilt among research participants which they voiced in interviews but said they would not speak of more widely to their social circle, to their family or to the company. Their candid disclosure of their feelings for the purposes of this research vindicates the methodological approach of not seeking access through employing firms.

The experiences shared by these expatriates revealed that their response to their working environment is influenced and constrained by multiple complexities, including: social conditioning through the education system; the Chinese state and corporate ideology (WHS and the loyalty of the Party); external threat (such as the technology trade war); firm-bounded processes and isolation during expatriation; and their own personal fears of the impact of failure and consequences of job loss for their socio-economic status. All these factors have significant impacts on expatriates' behaviour and understanding of their own individual agency. In reality, their

assessment of their opportunity to exert some control over the effort demanded of them was very low. The relevant intersecting factors are represented in Table 9.1

Table 9.1 Influences on the Expatriate's Journey

Recruitment and Firm-Bounded Deployment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education System • Firm-bounded Recruitment • Firm-assigned Expatriation • Dormitory Living • Absence of Cross-cultural Preparation
Experiencing Expatriation - Benefits and Hardships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Salary • Improved Prospects for Socio-economic Status • Unspecified Duration of the Assignment • Absence of Family • Intensive Working Patterns • Unfamiliar Host Country Conditions
Pressure to Comply - Constraints on Mobility Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Material Targets • Harmonious Society Goals • Sectoral Norms of Performance Where Alternative Employers likely to Pay Less • Failure Carries Risks of Loss of Job, Loss of guanxi, Loss of Status • Pressure of Family Responsibilities • Pride in Job • No Reasonable or Acceptable Alternative

9.1.2 Insights from Individual Experiences of Expatriation for the Role of the Expatriate and Chinese HRM

In the picture of working life that expatriates present in this study, it is apparent that the nature of HRM is coercive in many respects. It is possible to see a mix of labour management strategies such as, labour subjugation, restricted labour mobility, ideological and cultural control, sectoral influences and also perhaps a dual labour management strategy that separates expatriates from host country workers. While the small scale of this research study and its focus on individual experiences places limits on generalisation, some theoretical insights are possible. First, the heavy use of Chinese expatriates in Chinese MNCs supports the need to reconceptualise what the expatriate 'is'. Expatriates' descriptions of the way they are deployed suggests they are being utilised by the companies as part of an internationally mobile, technically competent, corporate workforce. Second, the research supports a more nuanced view of there being a single Chinese identity that explains Chinese expatriates' reputation for hardship tolerance and compliance, as features of Chinese HRM.

9.2 Theoretical contributions

9.2.1 The Chinese Expatriate as Part of a Global Workforce

In the HRM literature, expatriates are defined as "expensive people in crucial positions" (Brewster et al. 2014, p. 1921). By this definition, expatriates are expensive because their training, skills and expertise demand financial reward and corporate support during expatriation and repatriation. Their "crucial positions" are defined by their capital roles. Part of the reason for cross-cultural training in DMNCs is that expatriates are expected to adapt to the local culture and environment of their host country, at least to some extent. However, these conclusions have been drawn on the basis of research in DMNCs and the picture that emerges in this study of Chinese expatriates is very different.

In Companies A and B, large numbers of expatriates are dispatched all over the world largely without pre-departure cross-cultural training. This absence of preparation offers an important insight for the way that expatriation is being conceptualised within the firms. First, it indicates that integration of expatriates with

host-country cultures and institutions is neither valued nor necessary for the success of the company. Second, the Chinese expatriates in this study are deployed in a range of roles as required, within firm-bounded environments (included accommodation) that isolate them from the wider institutional and cultural features of the location of the subsidiary. To a large extent expatriates work in tiny bubbles of China, that are transported to different places around the world.

Furthermore, the expatriates are deployed in a range of operational and capital roles, and segmented (tiered) roles evolve during their expatriation. Thus, expatriate roles are not fixed but fluid – operational expatriates could be given managerial responsibilities for fellow workers and often began the pathway to more senior managerial roles by playing a dual labour and capital role in subsidiaries. The firms may also be using career development in subsidiaries as a management strategy to encourage expatriates to remain working abroad, where they will have cultivated new forms of guanxi relationships.

Companies A and B are national champions and market leaders and their practices are likely to set standards in the high technology sector. They utilise expatriates according to their business needs and heavily rely on their operational expatriates for intensive working practices in subsidiaries (such as, consistent overtime and 24/7 targets for customer service). In the process, they displace the local workforce. This is the basis of a transactional relationship between MNCs and a global pool of workers (Zheng and Smith 2019) which guarantees stability for the firm in its subsidiary operations.

It is concluded that firm bounded processes of recruitment and deployment, corporate control of accommodation, and expatriation without meaningful consultation or cross-cultural training, suggests that the expatriate is being deployed in line with business needs as part of a globally competent workforce. Their role is to aid overall firm objectives while maintaining a strong connection to their home country and culture, even while working in a foreign country. The findings of this study therefore prompt a reconsideration of the definition of the expatriate, to reflect their operational and labour activities as part of an internationally deployed workforce, rather than simply as an expression of the capital role in MNCs.

9.2.2 *The Compliant Chinese Expatriate – a feature of Chinese HRM?*

The high technology sector has a strong normative corporate culture internationally and demands high levels of customer service in a highly competitive market. As elsewhere – for example, Silicon Valley – in China, this competitive imperative has been associated with patterns of intensive working such as the 996 or 007 regimes, which is in turn linked with claims for hardship tolerance and compliance of Chinese workers. Identity formation among Chinese expatriates based on their desire to overcome the cultural and socio-economic history of China's one hundred years of humiliation, has been used to explain such tolerance, which has been said to act as a source of competitive advantage for the firm (Lai et al 2020; also, Cooke 2011). The findings from this research study suggest that these explanations may benefit from further review and refinement.

Expatriates mostly sought to mitigate their anxieties and hardships by convincing themselves that in fulfilling their work responsibilities they are 'doing the right thing'. In this process they draw on many different justifications for the need to endure the challenges of expatriate life. For example, they speak of their commitment to the development of the company, and sometimes China itself, while also affirming that working hard is the best way to achieve their career goals, earn higher bonus and support their families. These ideological and material sources of comfort and self-justification seem to be equally important to individuals. The findings resonate with the frames of acceptance (skills, income, status and power) theorised by C. Wright Mills (1951, 2002, pp. 229-238). Yet in contrast to Wright Mills's sample of workers, respondents to this study were conflicted and not quick to express positive satisfaction with their work. One, A2, had the means and opportunity to find alternative employment in the host country for her expatriation. A host of institutional, cultural and practical issues prevented other expatriates from exercising the same level of choice. Accordingly, just as an interviewee might refer to the honour of working for their firm while stressing on their exhaustion, senior managers who spoke confidently of the success of their careers and higher earnings might fall silent at certain points in interviews when thinking about the impact of their long absences on their personal relationships and family life. These findings highlight the complexity and sometimes contradictory elements of expatriation in Chinese MNCs. The second theoretical contribution of this research is therefore to support

engagement with broader contextual factors of influence on expatriate attitudes to work. These factors should include the concrete benefits and penalties associated with the life of an expatriate, including sectoral influences and broader socio-economic pressures.

In making this point, this study is not denying the relevance of corporate cultural norms for the expatriate's response to their working environment. Rather, it is being proposed that more account should be taken of other important and intersecting factors in the Chinese context. When interviewed, expatriate respondents shared some of their inner turmoil and reasoning. They generally sounded pragmatic and resigned to their expatriate existence, though some appeared to be traumatised by memories of difficult periods of expatriation. The issue of Confucian thought or Chinese history was not forthcoming in interviews. Therefore, if ideologically inclined to be more compliant with authority they did not express it in these terms (Hofstede 2010; see also, for example, Danford and Zhao 2012; Warner 2008; Wang 2020). However, social conditioning, along with their firm-bounded pathway into expatriation must have played a part in their understanding of their ability to change their life experience as an expatriate, and it was constrained by grounded assessments of their own limited agency in finding suitable alternatives that would equally satisfy their desire – and perhaps also their families' expectations – for higher incomes and status.

Employment with market leaders like Companies A and B brings material benefits which are important to expatriates. Similarly, they fear the consequences of job loss and could see no reasonable or acceptable alternative to the jobs they had. Arguably, based on the responses of research participants, an individual's decision to apply for a position at Company A or B may be the first and last point where they feel they exercise a degree of individual agency over decisions about their career and life.

9.3 Empirical and Methodological Contributions

The effective use of guanxi was the foundation for access. There is a probability that this research would not have been possible otherwise. The researcher developed and maintained the guanxi (relationships) with individual expatriates over a period of time, which allowed for repeated interviews and unstructured conversations. These

long-term, well-maintained relationships enabled the researcher to obtain rich information about expatriates' experiences and feelings on expatriation, in detail that would not have been possible through a one-off interview.

Cooke et al. (2020) called for more research in the IHRM field, based on bottom-up and practice-centred approaches to explore the impact and outcomes of expatriation. Accordingly, extended from the informative work of Zheng and Smith (2019) and by taking a micro-level, bottom upspeaking to expatriates, this research makes a meaningful empirical contribution. Being successful in accessing individual expatriates from two major Chinese high technology MNCs and interviewing them outside the company structure was an achievement that provided more freedom for them to talk about their work and life experiences without strict control from their employers. In this way, the research provides independent insights into the real-life experiences of expatriates and the impact of expatriation on their personal and professional lives.

9.4 Concluding Thoughts

The institutional context of China and its highly competitive labour market provides a structure and context for work and employment in which dissent is discouraged while positive attitudes towards intensive working are promoted and employee commitment is demanded (Danford and Zhao 2012; Nichols and Zhao 2010). The sectoral norms of the high technology sector are also powerful and the close association between national champions such as Companies A and B and the state is reinforced by firm-bounded recruitment and the assignment of relatively high numbers of expatriates in subsidiaries. These firm-bounded processes insulate the working practices demanded by the firms from external scrutiny, institutions and cultural influences, while material pressures minimise the scope for individual Chinese expatriates to understand or use their individual agency and develop a vision of another way to do things or to fundamentally challenge the status quo.

Rather than revealing a story of one-dimensional attitude of compliance with coercive HRM, the interviews held with expatriate respondents over a period of two years or more exposed many complex contradictions. Accordingly, respondents were proud but exhausted, committed but resentful, hard-working but driven by the need to survive and keep their job quite as much as conceptions of identity. These

individualised, contradictory influences were powerful in guiding expatriates' response to corporate control. In the detail of these individual experiences, it is possible to see the ways that the influence of state, sector, society and corporation interact in the management of expatriates and place constraints around choices in working life.

9.5 Limitations of the study

This study has two main limitations. First, due to the difficulty in accessing interviewees during the ongoing trade war (2018 to date) and the Covid-19 pandemic (2020 to date), the sample size is relatively small at twenty-seven respondents. Therefore, it is essential to exercise caution when interpreting the results and making broader conclusions. However, the long-term approach allowed for repeated interaction so that comparisons could be drawn and issues could be probed and revisited, which compensated for the relatively small sample. The interviewees also spanned a range of activities and it is felt that although the sample is small it is sufficiently representative to give an accurate snapshot of expatriate experience. Ideally, it would have been excellent to have the opportunity to undertake an ethnography to shadow expatriates to observe and feel their life. However, this would not have been possible without the knowledge of the firm and this was not compatible with the intention to get independent interviews.

Second, the study primarily relied on self-reported data, which may be susceptible to response bias and inaccurate reporting. The respondents' self-reported data may be influenced by memory bias or recall bias, where they may not accurately remember or report past events. Additionally, the self-reported data may be affected by social desirability bias, leading to respondents providing answers that they perceive to be more socially acceptable rather than truthful. Repeated interviewing was a mitigating factor in this respect, as it afforded opportunities for inconsistencies to be probed if they emerged.

As a whole it is felt that the independence of expatriate testimony provides valuable insights into the impact of expatriation in the Chinese high technology telecommunication sector. The findings can serve as a basis for future research to build upon, for example by expanding the sample size, cross-checking in different

sectors, and employing a mix of research methods (which include qualitative, exploratory interviewing) to confirm and extend these findings.

9.6 Implications for future study

Throughout the discussion of the study's findings, opportunities for future research have been highlighted. However, as an exploratory, qualitative study that aimed to broaden and deepen our understanding of expatriation, it has some overarching implications for future research that should be emphasised.

The expatriation of Chinese high technology MNCs has brought attention to a distinctive approach of utilising expatriates from developed country MNCs. However, further comparative research on expatriation across different sectors is necessary. The objective of such research should be to comprehend the variety of expatriation methods utilised across diverse sectors within China, which can enrich theoretical and empirical knowledge in the field of IHRM. The expatriation strategies implemented by Chinese high technology MNCs may also have implications for other emerging market MNCs, taking account of the context of any society must not be overlooked since it influences how work is structured and how workers perceive the nature of work (Cooke et al. 2020).

In the field of IHRM, future research should concentrate on micro-level studies that are employee-oriented. Current research indicates that Chinese expatriates have encountered numerous physical and mental difficulties during their expatriation, and their experiences did not appear to result in significant benefits. The social and professional impact on individual employees has not been thoroughly investigated, possibly due to the predominance of firm-level and quantitative research approaches. The present study has identified this gap and contributed to it, but more qualitative, long-term, and comprehensive studies are necessary. Furthermore, it is imperative for future social research to devote greater attention to the intimate aspects of expatriates' lives, particularly their sexual experiences, given their physical distance from family and significant isolation from the cultural context of host countries. An interesting avenue of exploration is whether there are replicable "Chinese approaches," such as shared meals, karaoke, and sauna (massage), that can be utilised to foster guanxi and facilitate business dealings with customers in the host countries (see Zheng 2009). Moreover, it should examine the influence of

expatriation on expatriates' children. Most Chinese expatriates are absent from home for extended periods and when interviewed they said they did not want their children to follow in their footsteps. Future studies could explore how children perceive their parents' jobs and how their parents' expatriation experiences influence their children's lives and careers. Addressing these inquiries will necessitate further research in the future. I am keen to keep exploring these research topics after my PhD.

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Appendix 1: Journal Papers on Foreign Expatriates in China compared with Expatriation from China

No.	Journal Title	No. of papers on Foreign expatriates working in China	No. of papers on Chinese expatriates working in Chinese MNCs outside China
1	Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)	1	1
2	Asia Pacific Business Review (APBR)	4	0
3	Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources (APJHR)	1	1
4	Asia Pacific Journal of Management (APJM)	3	0
5	Cross-Cultural Management (CCM)	3	2
6	Human Resource Management Journal (HRMJ)	1	0
7	International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management	6	0
8	International Journal of Human Resource Management (IJHRM)	31	6
9	Journal of Applied Psychology	2	0
10	Journal of Business Venturing	2	0
11	Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS)	1	0
12	Journal of World Business (JWB)	3	1
13	Journal of Management	4	0
14	Journal of Organizational Behaviour	1	0
15	Organization Science	2	0
16	Organization Studies	1	0
17	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	1	0
18	Personnel Psychology: A Journal of Applied Research	2	0
19	Psychological Science	2	0
20	Research Policy	1	1
Total: 84		72	12
Source: <i>Zhong et al. (2015, p.292)</i>			

Appendix 2—unstructured interview guideline for expatriates and repatriates

1. Can you please introduce yourself?
2. I would like to learn about your experiences of expatriation. Could you begin by telling me how you came to be selected as an expatriate?

Prompts:

- a) Have you had more than one expatriate assignment?
 - b) Have you experienced repatriation?
 - c) How does expatriation affect your life outside work?
 - d) What are the best and worst things about the expatriation experience?
3. Are there any areas we haven't discussed that you feel are important and I should have asked you about?

Note: all interviews will be conducted in Chinese.

Appendix 3—interview questions for senior managers

1. Can you tell me about how you recruit and select expatriates?
 - a) Are there equal numbers of male and female expatriates?
 - b) How big is the level of demand for expatriate assignments – that is demand by the company and demand from employees?
2. What benefit does the company gain from having expatriates in its overseas subsidiaries?
3. What kind of training does your company provide for expatriates?
 - a) In your view is the training sufficient or would you like to see it expanded?
4. What is the usual length of assignment for an expatriate who takes an international assignment?
 - a) Do assignments follow on quickly from one another?
 - b) What repatriation measures exist when they return to China – how are they helped to settle back into the company?
 - c) What typical problems (if any) do you encounter when expatriates return to work in China?
5. Do they have any special benefits when they return to China as a result of having completed their expatriate assignment?
6. In your opinion, does the experience and process of expatriation change the employee's performance or attitude towards their work? If so, could you give some examples?
7. In your opinion, should current policies for the management of expatriates be changed in any way? If so, how?

Note: All interviews will be conducted in Chinese.

Appendix 4—Ethics Approval



Cardiff Business School

Ysgol Busnes Caerdydd

Muhao Du,
Cardiff Business School
Cardiff University

10 September 2019

Dear Muhao,

Ethics Approval Reference: 1819052

Project Title: A study of the management of expatriates in Chinese MNCs operating overseas

I would like to confirm that your project has been granted ethics approval as it has met the review conditions.

Should there be a material change in the methods or circumstances of your project, you would in the first instance need to get in touch with us for re-consideration and further advice on the validity of the approval.

I wish you the best of luck on the completion of your research project.

Yours sincerely,

Electronic signature via email

Dr. Debbie Foster
Chair of the School Research Ethics Committee
Email: CARBSResearchEthics@cardiff.ac.uk

Appendix 5—Consent Form



Cardiff Business School
Ysgol Busnes Caerdydd

A study of the management of expatriates in Chinese MNCs operating overseas - Consent Form

This research will investigate how Chinese expatriates experiences in expatriation from recruitment and selection to repatriation. The 'bottom-up' research into the concrete experience of Chinese expatriates will provide detailed case histories and enable current notions of Chinese human resource management (HRM) to be explored and deconstructed. The aim of this research is to fill the gap in expatriate management research community in the context of Chinese MNCs. Qualitative research methods (e.g. interview) will be adopted to address the research question.

I understand that my participation in this project will involve answering a set of interview questions about their accounts of personal background, experience, and opinions which will require approximately 45 minutes of my time.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. If for any reason I have second thoughts about my participation in this project, I am free to withdraw or discuss my concerns with Dr. Jean Jenkins (jenkinsj1@cardiff.ac.uk).

I understand that the information provided by me will be held confidentially and securely, such that only the researcher can trace this information back to me individually. The information will be retained for up to one year and will then be anonymised, deleted or destroyed. I understand that if I withdraw my consent I can ask for the information I have provided to be anonymised/deleted/destroyed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016.

I, _____ (NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Muhao Du, Dum1@cardiff.ac.uk; PhD of Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, under the supervision of Dr Jean Jenkins and Dr Heike Doering.

Signed:

Date:

Appendix 6—Informed Consent Declaration



Informed Consent Declaration – For Research Participants

This study is being conducted by Muhao Du, PhD Student at Cardiff Business School and Cardiff University under the supervision of Dr Jean Jenkins and Dr Heike Doering who can be contacted via following email address: WellsPE@cardiff.ac.uk; doeringh@cardiff.ac.uk.

Participation in the research project will involve an interviewer administered face-to-face semi-structured expert interview attempting to investigate how Chinese expatriates experiences in expatriation from recruitment and selection to repatriation.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. Participants may also ask questions at any time and discuss any concerns with either the researcher (Dum1@cardiff.ac.uk) or the supervisor as listed above.

The findings of the study will form part of the research assignment.

All information provided during the interview will be held anonymously so that it will not be possible to trace information or comments back to individual contributors. Information will be stored in accordance with the current Data Protection Act.

Participants can request information and feedback about the purpose and results of the study by applying directly to the researcher Dum1@cardiff.ac.uk.

26th of July 2019
Researcher – Muhao Du PhD Student
Cardiff Business School
Cardiff University