

Turbulent economics, changing industries: Self-initiated expatriates in China

Abstract

This study is addressing the importance of perceived employability and its dynamic yet relative nature in the context of self-initiated expatriates. In this empirical qualitative research 23 western self-initiated expatriates with diversified career backgrounds were interviewed focusing on their subjective employment experience in China in the Chinese organisations retrospectively underlining the emerging heterogeneity of the current SIE population in the global labour markets. The findings revealed phenomena of perceived employability erosion and contextual employability traps in the context of employability dilemma. This study is increasing our understanding of the dynamics of perceived employability particularly of those SIE individuals in China that are solely responsible for the development and outcomes of their careers

Key words: extremes, flexibility, instability, organisational and/or personal learning, thinking outside of square

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Introduction

According to many studies, individuals are acting more often upon their perceptions rather than the objective reality (see e.g. Berntson & Marklund, 2007; Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). Perceived employability on the other hand is individual's subjective opinion or feeling about one's abilities to find or have work in a future (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010). The concept of work has different meaning to each individual. It can simply be seen as means of earning money or occupation, but more often as an activity for using and gaining skills and abilities thus adding to individual's perceived employability. In the turbulent and uncertain global economics many skilled individuals are however being faced with a phenomenon of *employability dilemma*. Employability dilemma in this study describes how the talent and competencies the individuals have accumulated are no longer needed because the demand has ceased or been relocated to geographically distant labour-markets emphasising the contextual and relative nature of employability.

Due to the concept of employability dilemma, this study is addressing those self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) who are forced to manage and are singularly responsible for their own employability in the context of one of the most challenging and fastest growing expatriate destinations (Brookfield Global Relocation Services, 2013). Due to its uniqueness and perceived differences compared to the western organisation culture, Mainland China (China) is providing a theoretically rich and understudied testing bed for this sample group of SIEs as being 'an extreme observation case' for the phenomenon. Consumer electronics industry, as many other industries, has recently gone through changes with tremendous downsizing and re-structuring operations in western countries leaving many skilled professionals with a fear of job loss, inability to find employment matching their competencies or in the worst case unemployed, and transferred the major operations to Asia in the seek of cost reduction and shorter time-to-market. Chinese consumer electronic companies, on the other hand, have been strongly and even aggressively developing their know-how by employing western SIEs by temporary, fixed term contracts with the aim of knowledge transfer and internationalisation. This trend is emphasising the personal responsibility of employability for those SIE individuals with no organisational career planning or support, repatriation packages nor promise for continuation after the termination of the contract in comparison to those organisation sent expatriates (fc. Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Suutari & Brewster, 2000).

This study is synthesising the theoretical concepts of SIEs and subjective perceived employability (PE) aiming at illustrating the dynamic and contextual, but relative nature of it. The focus of this research is on the *subjective perceptions* that are based on individuals' own evaluations of their employability reflecting their real employment experiences as a part of a Chinese organisation in China from the retrospective point of view. These concepts of subjective employability perceptions of SIEs and careers in China in this study are thus providing insights and angles into contemporary career theories in a new light that have not been studied before and also identifying more heterogeneous identities of SIEs with different backgrounds and careers.

This study starts with short literature reviews to concepts of self-initiated expatriates and perceived employability. These reviews are followed by empirical part that presents the findings focusing to the following questions: 1) How the individual SIEs perceive the development of their employability?; and 2) What factors are influencing the process? After the discussion section the study addresses the limitations and suggestions for further research.

Literature reviews

Perceived employability

Perceived employability (subjective approach) can be defined as *individual's perception of one's possibilities to achieve or keep a job* having its focus on the future. Perceived employability has often been connected to the concept of job insecurity (e.g. De Witte, 1999) and the fear of potential job loss particularly by those that perceive to have fewer employment alternatives (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashfort, 2004). The concept of employability has its emphasis also on the need for the ability to cope and to be able to find new employment particularly in contemporary labour-market environments reducing thus the perceptions of stress and increasing general well-being (Wittekind et al., 2010) and being an important driving force for the decision making of individuals on their future careers.

Factors that are affecting the perceived employability can be both individual and context related. Rothwell and Arnold (2007) have pinpointed the following individual related antecedents: skills and behaviours that contribute to effective performance (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Van der Heijden, 2002); resilience, in the sense of being able to respond effectively to changing circumstances (Rajan, Van Eupen, Chapple, & Lane, 2000); networks of contacts which provide information and support (Fugate et al., 2004); and job-seeking

skills and labour-market knowledge (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Wittekind et al. (2010) have also analysed the existing models of employability on which the most studies agree upon, those being: willingness to develop new competencies or change job, knowledge of the labour market and the most importantly job-related qualifications. Other antecedents mentioned in the literature are age, gender, training and education (e.g. Benson, 2006; Berntson et al., 2006; Forte & Hansvick, 1999; Mihail & Elefterie, 2006; Nielsen, 1999; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007; Van der Heijden, 2002).

There are also factors that cannot be influenced by enhancing personal competencies or behaviour. The impetus of industry and state of economics, or economic fluctuations (Berntson et al., 2006) are seen to have relevance with the notion that employees in a booming sector might perceive themselves better than the others (Wittekind et al., 2010) being applicable controversially that employees in declining sector might perceive themselves worse than the others. Also the literature is emphasising the role of the employer's in a form of employer's (lack of) support for personal career and skill development (e.g. Becker, 1993; De Vos, De Hawn, & Van der Heijden, 2011).

Self-initiated Expatriates

The research tradition on SIEs is based on Inkson, Arthur, Pringle and Barry's 1997 definition: 'individuals who decide on their own to go abroad to find work, without being sent by an organization and they decide when to repatriate'. SIE employment has been connected to the development opportunities (Myers & Pringle, 2005) and SIEs have been reported with higher career expectations (Biemann & Andresen, 2010). SIEs have been underlined to differ from the assigned or organisation sent expatriated (OEs) often in terms of their financial arrangements, received organizational support or development opportunities (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010), organisational level or position they are working at and (lack of) repatriation plan (Suutari & Brewster, 2000). OEs are also often reported to be equipped with a better international business understanding, intercultural competencies and general operational and managerial skills (Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007) whereas SIEs come from different positions and backgrounds, with potentially neither previous managerial experience nor career orientation (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). These properties underline the potential for weaker employability position of SIEs emphasising the personal responsibility of an individual in contemporary labour markets for maintaining employable.

Despite the vivid academic discussion on the definitions and sub-groups of the SIEs (see Andresen,

Bergdolt, & Margenfeld 2013, 11; Doherty & Richardson, 2013), the research interest on SIEs has been increasing during the past decade. Studies in the field of SIEs have been focused on motives for expatriation (Carr, Inkson, & Thorn, 2005; Doherty, Richardson, & Thorn, 2011; Selmer & Luring, 2010), adjustment (Peltokorpi, 2008; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Cao, Hirchi, & Deller, 2011; 2013), career anchors (Suutari & Taka, 2004; Crowley-Henry, 2007; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010), gender and family (Tharenou 2010; Richardson, 2006; Tharenou, 2008; Carr et al., 2005), career capital development (Myers & Pringle, 2005; Jokinen, Brewster, & Suutari, 2008; Cao et al., 2011) and repatriation (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Academia has also been interested in the career outcomes of the SIE assignments resulting how ever as contradicting results (see Inkson, Thomas and Barru, 1999; Tharenou, 2009). Studies have also pinpointed the implications of the SIEs for the corporate HRM strategies as well as for the individual career planning (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Despite the theoretical and practical importance of the perceived employability of SIEs this topic has not been addressed in the literature.

Methodology

The study has adopted a qualitative research design based on semi-thematised interviews with 23 westerners of 11 different nationalities that were found and approached via LinkedIn or by using snowballing method, and interviewed in person in China or by Skype. Due to the quite new and recent emerging trend of westerners being employed by the Chinese companies in the China no large numbers of SIEs were found, but all potential individuals that fulfilled the criterion of being western by origin and having moved to in order to be employed by a Chinese consumer electronics company were approached and included, only if they accepted the invitation. These individual were located in the major technology areas in China (Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen). The data was transcribed and analysed by NVivo10 software using thematic categorization that was emerging from the data.

The qualitative research strategy was chosen due its suitability to illustrating the phenomenon, and the context of China due to its specific features (e.g. organisational culture) perceived of being a theoretically good testing environment by being fresh and interesting thus providing new aspects to the phenomenon.

The subjective approach of this study is following an emerging number of studies of perceived employability (e.g. Berntson et al., 2006; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007;) and is based on the assumption that SIEs with fixed-

term contracts must and constantly are estimating their ability to find employment in different contexts from their subjective perspective thus identifying potential for their personal and career development.

The perceived employability SIE identities in this study were identified based on the personal experiences emerging from the data reflecting the SIE employment and experience in a Chinese company impacting their perceived employability being either *enhanced* or *enhancing* versus *eroded* or *eroding* reflecting the status of the perceived employability process in China (has come to an end or is still continuing). These perceptions combined with their perceived role in the host organisation in the beginning of the employment provided a starting point for the assessment. These four distinctive identities were namely: a western: *'They think it's kind of cool to have a western designer'*; a specialist: *'(My ability) it's a scarce capability here in China'*; a consultant: *'They were looking for a very deep knowledge for that particular problem'* and an advisor: *'I have always been like a CEO whispering guy'*. These roles reflect the importance of personal prestige that was perceived as an important recruitment factor in China emerging from the data. Personal prestige in this study refers to those person related qualities that are valued only in particular context and are thus important for the employer, e.g. ethnical origin, credibility or being somehow unique. These identities are thus discussed more in the findings.

Findings

The age range of the SIEs at the time of the interviews was from 26 to 57 years. They had all been or were still working in China for a Chinese company within consumer electronics business segment in different positions at different levels of an organisation. Chinese organisations represented three different types of companies: small local, large national and large international, and were all 100% Chinese owned with the headquarters in the Mainland China. Most typically the employment contracts were from 1 to 3 years in total tenure (n=15), and renewed and evaluated by the local management on the yearly basis despite the original tenure of the contract. The perceived employability development of each SIE employability typology is presented and discussed next.

Enhanced Westerns

The over all PE development of these individuals was the feeling of 'enhanced' at all levels during the employment in China. These individuals were usually unemployed or in positions not matching their education prior to their employment in China with low perceived employability in their home country. They

were usually recruited at the spot in China by personally contacting local companies for employment (job seeking skills) having an emphasis on their western background and education (personal prestige) despite the lack of work experience (job related skills) that did not play the major role in the recruitment process.

P20: 'I have seen a lot of Chinese companies that are intentionally looking for foreigners into their positions because of this foreign element, many organisations want to be seen as international company, so they want to have foreigners in their meetings despite the fact that they don't understand the word of the language, it just makes them look better, so that's the impression to have..'

During the employment these individuals were able to accumulate knowledge and skills professionally (job related skills) and establish networks mostly within international communities in China (networks) even though the over all process combined with the local corporate culture and language barrier was perceived as frustrating and challenging (eroding effect).

P12: 'I have learned a lot and been in contact with people from different countries... I have built my designability in China, I really did not have any sense before.. and also my technical knowledge.'

Despite this enhancement on professional skills these individuals found it hard to progress in their profession in China after the certain point underlining the fact that there are certain limits for enhancement in every context thus pinpointing the description of being 'enhanced'.

P11: 'Actually working for a Chinese company does not really help you to get a good portfolio, to work in a non-Chinese company...because what you do, it's really basic, pretty much just styling and western companies want to see far more than just styling...'

Also the ability to find replacing employment in western countries (job seeking skills) due to the lack of geographically and occupationally targeted networks and labour market knowledge was perceived difficult if not impossible resulting as 'being trapped' feelings.

P12: 'I feel that we have had enough, to be honest... we have enough.. and at the same time it's a bit mixed feelings.. at the same time there is still something that makes us to stay here and there are a lot of things that make us to leave, it's like in general in China, it's a mixed feelings... but all the possibilities are here that I would not have in (...), I could not find an other job there.. here I can find a job in two days..'

Enhancing Advisors

Also Advisors perceived their employability in China as 'enhancing'. With the difference to the Westerns these individuals perceived their employability as strong prior to their employment in China as a result of their top management roles and experience in international MNCs and being well established in the industry (work related skills and networks). These SIEs differ significantly from the other SIE identities by the recruitment process and the positions offered in the Chinese organisations. Advisors were usually recruited directly by the top management and offered senior positions together with an access to the information in the

recruiting organisation. Their employment had been founded on trust of the recruiting organisation in China (personal prestige) by either having had an organisation as a partner or customer in the past or by having long working experience with the Chinese, based on personal relationships (guanxi, networks).

P21: *'So this Mainland (China) colleague approached me with this job opportunity and told me that GM (general manager) was going to be in town.. whether I was interested to meet him'*

P18: *'I had (...) account there and I actually wanted to acquire (...) for my new employer as well, but suddenly the tables turned and they sent me an email and asked if I would like to work for them..'*

These individuals had a rare opportunity to be positioned in the true management teams of the Chinese organisations and were given access to knowledge combined with opportunity to develop and learn professionally in their occupation by receiving information and having power to influence and participate in decision making process (job related skills, networking, resilience).

P13: *'I am in such a position that I get very futuristic information about the industry very regularly.. like all the competitive intelligence reports and market reports and their strategy analytics and on how the market will develop... I am also luckily loaded with the information from the colleagues and the thing is that the company sees that I can add value and as a result they do share information with me and I can contribute to different meetings and things..'*

These individuals also appeared very conscious about their special position in Chinese organisation and its potential value in the future to their career options and paths (personal prestige, labour market knowledge).

P4: *'I think that in combination of my experience and history in this work for the Chinese company in China and having the insights to the top management and being integrated into daily processes, decisions and things, that makes me more valuable of course for those who try to understand what is going on in China, of course...'*

On the other hand, also Advisors acknowledged that their PE including the most important employability factors: job related skills, networks, job seeking skills and labour market knowledge were fast becoming very context related resulting as perceptions of being trapped in Chinese labour market or certain field of industry. After having interesting but demanding position in China, replacing and fulfilling employment options at home or other western labour markets were perceived difficult to find preventing potential for repatriation.

P21: *'My consideration is to move back and start something new after all these 20 years in Asia.. it would be new lifestyle choice, finding new balance. Getting back, it's always in the back of my head but I lost contacts in (..) after being here for the first 4 or 5 years, not intentionally though...'*

Eroding Consultants

The over all PE development of Consultants, particularly in the field of job related skills, was perceived as 'eroding'. The role of these individuals in the Chinese organisations was to transfer knowledge or solution to some particular operational problem or situation, or to train local employees with very limited or no potential for updating or gaining new job related skills or competencies (job related skills) resulting as feelings of

employability exploitation. In this study this concept is used for describing a situation in which an individual is releasing one's skills and knowledge but failing to enhance his/her own professional skills or knowledge in return resulting as employability erosion with limited or no potential for avoiding it within the current employment.

P4: 'It's just like the fact that the company has an ability to improve and grow in competence to become successful and they need to use tools to make that happen, and then they hire people to make sure that they increase their competence and when they have made sure that they've absorbed all information, they send them home. That's nothing weird in China, that's how all employees are used.'

Despite Consultants' extensive experience in the industry (job related skills and personal prestige) they were unemployed at the time of recruitment with little option for employment due to the state of the industry and perceived higher age. They were often recruited based on the recommendations or invitations to apply from previous colleagues already working in China (networks).

P7: 'I think they were looking for a 'rain maker' somebody who was extremely good at planning and designing and who could solve all the problems at once'.

The general feelings of frustration and not receiving feedback or guidance at work were impacting the over all experience. Despite their roles and positions in the Chinese organisations, in the contrary to contemporary western context, the concept of age and experience turned as an advantage due to the hierarchical nature of Chinese organizational culture and respect for older professionals (personal prestige).

P2: 'China as a culture has a respect for older people and they expect that and I think that they are.. to get people to execute what a manager tells them, that is not a problem in China, they need seniority and seniority is something that you get by being around for longer time....'

On the other hand the over all experience in China also increased the perceived feelings of being able to cope and contribute to the changing environments (resilience).

P5: 'I have this feeling that if I have been able to cope here in China, I will be able to cope anywhere..'

Those individuals that were hired due to their seniority and ability to transfer specific knowledge perceived their employability as challenging and constantly eroding also back at home. Seniority and profound professionalism at 'the Asianized' field of industry combined with industry specific networks that were enhancing factors in China, were perceived as eroding factors upon repatriation.

P7: 'I am looking (for a job) all the time.. I don't know if my criterion is wrong...it's hard to see if the requirements have changed, there had not been need to look for a job for such a long time...I think that the values are like that today... I had this conversation and they said that they are actually looking for younger.. I remember thinking myself when I was younger that over 50 year olds are really old, but I don't feel old at all, it should not be a preventing factors at all..'

Eroded Specialists

The perceived employment of Specialists as 'eroded' was two-folded and they differ from other SIE identities in some respects. Specialists usually possess skills or abilities (job specific skills) that are a scarce commodity, based on personal ability and development skills (personal prestige) and are easily transferred into other industries. In practise their over all employability before, during and after the employment in China was perceived as good, but the effect of the employment in China was perceived as temporarily eroding from certain aspects. The motivation to accept employment in China was not based on the bad labour market situation or threat of unemployment, but on personal urge or interest for change, challenge or development, and the potential for advancement (resilience, personal and career development motivations) that were not perceived to realize in full due to local organisational culture, communication barriers, resistance for foreign influence and lower technology levels preventing opportunities for development and causing frustrating situations impacting the over all experience:

P6: 'I was brought here to bring change and bring knowledge and the experience that they did not have, but immediately the Chinese boss said that this person, who brought this change here is not welcome

P1: 'I was a bit surprised, after been there dozens of times, I thought that I was used to being there, but it was 1000 times harder than expected.. and with the Chinese, it (job) can be terminated when ever, in two seconds, depending on the mood of the manager..'

On the other hand employment in China also brought some enhancement on their recruitment potential after the assignment

P6: '.. This person (recruiting HR manager) said: 'we like that you've been to China and have experienced totally different working environment' and I said, 'yeah, for sure, this is very different and tough in a way, you have to be very flexible and you have to question your values and theirs'.. it was probably their head of HR who knew the same experience, knew what I was experiencing.. so lets move on..'

P1: 'It really helped me, the first job that I got back in (..) came via one person I met in China and the following after that as well.'

particularly in a form of new networks and personal growth (resilience).

P6: 'People that move here, international people.. when they see each other it's immediately magnetic and other people in China, I just find them on Internet, on Twitter or LinkedIn and we have on-going conversations.. contacts that I would have not from (...), just being expat in China will grow your contacts of international people... but everything that I have achieved here, whether I have done a great job, it's for those guys to look better, I don't .. I don't get anything back.. nobody is telling me if I have done a great job, its not a Chinese culture... so its about setting my own goals, my own expectations and that is what has made ME grow!'

It appears that those SIEs that have more choice and opportunities for employment have also higher expectations for their career development and outcomes during and after the employment in China.

Particularly the longer tenure in an unsatisfactory position was perceived as an eroding aspect.

P9: For a career point of view I am not sure if it was a good choice, there was not so much I could do, it was more like sitting there as a vase and like: 'nice, we have a western here'. I do understand that at the management level they had made that decision to acquire skills and knowledge from other companies, but at the floor level they simply could not do that.'

P3: 'When you come here you learn to know new people and get new contacts, but in a longer run your professional skills do just fade away, that's the negative side of it..'

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to expand our understanding of the concept of perceived employability and its dynamic nature in the context of employment of self-initiated expatriates in China in Chinese organisations and to identify those factors that are perceived to influence the process by enhancing or eroding effects. At the same time this empirical study identified four SIE identities that differ from each other in many aspects providing new angles to the over all concept of SIEs. The individual SIEs in this study represented a large variety of professionals of different ages and family backgrounds. Typical to the field of industry this data set was dominated by men. These finding as concluded in Table 1.

 Insert Table 1 about here

These individual SIEs came from very different career and employment backgrounds having different motivations for looking for or accepting an employment in a geographically and culturally distant location and environment. This study is thus illustrating an emerging trend of western individuals being employed in the developing economies although major cities in China could be considered as developed despite the perceived cultural differences. With the comparison to the existing literature (cf. Biemann & Andresen, 2010; Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2010; Jokinen et al., 2008; Peltokorpi & Froese, 2009; Suutari & Brewster, 2000) this study is illustrating how the SIE employment is currently attracting larger and more diversified populations of individuals that are facing very different types of challenges affecting their perceived employability at different stages of their SIE career.

This study is recognizing an emerging phenomenon in a context of new careers: an *employability dilemma*.

This study is illustrating how the jobs are moving globally and individuals with more boundaryless and protean attitudes (see Tharenou, 2003; Suutari & Taka, 2004; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Crowley-Henry, 2007) are able or forced to follow those into the context in which their careers and perceived employability is

exposed to different organisation culture and labour market resulting potentially as perceptions of being exploited or trapped. By exploitation in this study, it is referring to the finding in which an individual is releasing one's skills and knowledge but failing to enhance his/her own professional skills or knowledge in return resulting as perceived employability erosion with limited or no potential for avoiding it. Gherardi and Murgia (2012) are referring to similar phenomenon in the context of young Italian temporary knowledge workers. The perceived trap on the other hand in this study is used to describe a career development in which an individual perceives of being 'a hostage' of certain field of industry or geographical labour market in which s/he is perceived to be the most employable.

This study presents an example on how the perceived employability is a dynamic and highly contextual, yet relative concept evolving in time and is influenced by the changes within individuals' working environment and the content of personal properties and competencies, and expectations for the outcomes. The findings of this study are supported by the existing employability literature that particularly the development of job related skills (Wittekind et al., 2010; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007) combined with personal properties, personal prestige and relevant context related quality networks do have an affect on perceived employability. In this study the most influential contextual factors for perceived employability development during the SIE employment in China were connected to the individual's position (function) in the organisation, tenure of the contract and organisational culture including issues related to the perceived (lack of) organizational support for development and received guidance or feedback, local management methods and behaviour, particularly in connection of personal frustration with the local organisational culture and behaviour being a factor that was perceived strongly and mentioned by all individuals in this dataset. These factors are concluded in the Table 2.

 Insert Table 2 about here

As a summary, being employable in one context does not guarantee employment in another. It is a very relative and personal position. Perceived employability is a combination of personal properties and context related factors that are interacting in time. Better understanding of the process and the factors of perceived employability brings us closer to understanding the career decisions and motivating factors of SIEs and other

individuals in the international labour-markets providing more room for deeper theoretical discussions in the academia.

Contribution to Theory

Despite the studies of perceived employability in the contexts of job insecurity and demands for increasing flexibility, the empirical studies on perceived employability and its dynamic nature during (self-initiated) expatriation could not be found. This empirical study is thus contributing to the need for more context related and subjective approaches to SIE studies addressed in the literature (e.g. Al Ariss & Özbilgin, 2010; Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Guo, Porschitz, & Alves, 2013). It is also 1) identifying emerging types of SIE identities; 2) illustrating and highlighting an emerging trend of SIEs at different organisational levels in Chinese organisations and contributing to the development of new research agenda for future studies; 3) extending the concept of perceived employability to the understudied area of self-initiated expatriates, thus filling in the gap in the literature; 4) addressing the dynamic, relative and contextual nature of the perceived employability, providing a new angle to the issue; 5) highlighting the understudied phenomena of employability dilemma and its implications of employability erosion and enhancement together with perceptions of exploitation and employability traps that are forming a new research agenda for the future; and 6) illustrating the anatomy of perceived employability that is highly contextual and moving across three factors: individual properties, environmental factors and time.

Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications. It is illustrating the importance of perceptions in the career path decision making particularly for those individuals whose career development may not be supported by employing organisations. It is increasing our understanding of the: 1) urge for proactive self-managed behaviour in the context of personal employability; 2) need for organisations to fulfil the development needs of SIEs in order to keep the talented individuals; 3) need for developing both intervention and preventing measures for those with weaker employability positions; and 4) phenomena that provide important research agenda for further research and understanding the concepts behind it.

Limitations and Further Research

The findings that are emerging from the subjective interview data have its potential for sample selection bias. This research is, in deed, culturally biased as any research that is based on individual perceptions in

culturally distant environments. The individuals are naturally reflecting their experience from their own settings (subjective view) and making comparisons with their former experience and surroundings. This research is also purposefully highlighting the perceptions from so called 'western' point of view contrasting the differences between the 'western' and the 'Chinese' organizational behaviour due to its perceived conflicting nature that is underlining the contextual nature of employability. The most limiting factor however is the sample size although the phenomenon of western SIEs in Chinese organisations is still quite uncommon that might limit the generalizability of the findings into other contexts.

More research is thus needed on understanding the concepts and mechanisms of perceived employability and the means of enhancing it along with the phenomena pinpointed in this study in different contexts. Also how the phenomena related to employability dilemma appear in other career contexts, or from the actual labour market point of view. Literature has also been emphasising how our actions are often guided by our perception rather than objective reality. Future research should explore the accuracy of those perceptions while critically reflecting the actual labour market needs.

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Tables:

Table 1: Table of informants with background information for perceived employability identity

Interview identification M (male) / F (female)	REGION OF ORIGIN	DURATION OF INTERVIEW (MINUTES)	AGE AT THE TIME OF INTERVIEW	AGE AT THE BEGINNING OF SIE	TOTAL YEARS IN CHINA AT THE TIME OF INTERVIEW	YEARS IN INDUSTRY OR PROFESSION BEFORE SIE	PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY IDENTITY	FAMILY STATUS / LOCATION DURING THE SIE	PREVIOUS EXPATRIATION EXPERIENCE
P1 (M)	NE	52	43	42	1	12	Eroded Specialist	wife and children with	no
P2 (M)	NE	65	49	47	2	11	Eroded Specialist	wife with, independent children	no
P3 (M)	NE	64	44	42	2	15	Eroded Specialist	family part time with	OE in western country
P4 (M)	NE	71	47	42	2+2	13	Enhancing Advisor	at home	Repatriated SIE from China, re-expatriated to China
P5 (M)	NE	66	56	55	1	15	Eroding Consultant	wife with, independent children	no
P6 (M)	NE	67	43	41	2	8	Eroded Specialist	wife with, no children	no
P7 (M)	NE	72	54	51	3	21	Eroding Consultant	family at home	no
P8 (F)	NE	61	38	37	1	13	Eroded Specialist	single	OE in western country
P9 (M)	SA	97	36	29	2+2	0	Enhanced Western	wife and a small child with	Repatriated SIE from China, re-expatriated to China
P10 (M)	NA	95	52	49	3	11	Eroding Consultant	family at home	SIE + OE in western country
P11 (M)	NE	66	42	40	2	6	Eroded Specialist	single	no
P12 (M)	SE	87	40	34	6	1	Enhanced Western	wife and a small child with	no
P13 (M)	NE	95	40	37	3+3	10	Enhancing Advisor	local partner	OE in China, re- expatriated to China
P14 (M)	NE	44	31	29	2	9	Eroded Specialist	single	no
P15 (M)	SA	48	26	23	3	0	Enhanced Western	single	no
P16 (M)	NE	66	38	36	2	8	Eroded Specialist	wife with, no children	SIE + OE in western country
P17 (M)	NE	75	28	24	4	3	Eroded Specialist	single	no
P18 (M)	NE	55	43	41	2	5	Enhancing Advisor	wife with, no children	SIE in western country
P19 (M)	SE	92	30	22	9	0	Enhanced Western	partner with, no children	no
P20 (F)	SE	92	30	22	9	1	Enhanced Western	partner with, no children	no
P21 (M)	NE	106	60	41	19	14	Enhancing Advisor	married with local, children	SIE in Asia
P22 (M)	NE	57	44	43	1	12	Eroded Specialist	single	no
P23 (M)	NE	48	33	32	1	6	Eroded Specialist	wife with	no

NE: Northern Europe
SE: Southern Europe
NA: Northern Americas
SA: Southern Americas

Table 2: Factors affecting the subjective perceptions of employability

	BEFORE THE SIE		DURING THE SIE		AFTER THE SIE	
	ENHANCING FACTORS	ERODING FACTORS	ENHANCING FACTORS	ERODING FACTORS	ENHANCING FACTORS	ERODING FACTORS
Enhancing Westerners	Western education Western origin Willingness to move	Lack of occupation related networks Lack of job related skills Lack of job seeking skills Lack of labour market knowledge	Local networks Skills and competencies by work experience Job seeking skills in China Knowledge of local labour markets Knowledge of local organisation culture	Local organisation culture Language and communication barrier Resistance for foreigners	Knowledge of Chinese organisation culture Work experience and competencies	Job related skills acquired in China Lack of networks outside of China Lack of labour market knowledge in West State of industry and economics
Eroding Consultants	Long professional history Industry related networks Certain skill / competence Ability to move	Age Industry specific skills Lack of job seeking skills Lack of labour market knowledge State of industry Tenure of unemployment	Seniority / Age Endurance Knowledge of local organisation culture Local networks	Lack of feedback or guidance Non-specified role in organisation Title not accordance to the role Lack of development opportunities Language and communication barrier	Knowledge of Chinese organisation culture Local networks in China Endurance	Longer tenure of the contract Age State of industry and economics Highly industry related and outdated job related skills Partly no industry related networks Difficulty to transfer abilities into other contexts
Eroded Specialists	Up-to-date skills/competencies Special competencies Current position in recognised organization Industry related networks Motivation to move	State of industry	Local and international networking Personal growth Shorter tenure of the contract	Language and communication barrier Perceived lower local technology level Longer tenure of the contract Local resistance for foreigners Resistance for outsider input Lack of development opportunities	Active networking Experience in China as a proof of global mind-set Personal growth Ability to use skills in other contexts	State of industry State of economics
Enhancing Advisors	Seniority Industry specific skills Networks, Guanxi Western origin Motivation to move	State of industry Interest for specific industry	Good position in the organisation Access to knowledge Ability to influence Ability to participate in decision making Western origin Local networks, Guanxi Support from the management	Long distance to family Local resistance for foreigners	Access to industry specific knowledge and information in China Industry specific networks	Industry specific competencies Location specific networks Difficulty to use abilities in other contexts Lack of interest for other industries Lack of industry related opportunities outside of China