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‘Going through the Mist’: Early Career Transitions of Chinese Millennial Returnees

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5. “Going through the mist”: early career transitions of Chinese Millennial returnees

Emily T. Porschitz, Chun Guo and José Alves

Over the past decade management practitioners have sought to understand the career expectations of the Millennial generation – those born between 1979 and 1994 (Myers and Sadaghiani, 2010) – who are rapidly becoming a dominant force in the global economy. As workers from the Baby Boomer generation move towards retirement, organization leaders are becoming more interested in understanding how to attract and retain millennial employees most effectively (Walmsley, 2007). A large body of research is devoted to uncovering the career expectations of millennial workers, so that practitioners can better understand them. Findings suggest Millennials have high expectations regarding career success as well as work-life balance and are not loyal to their employers (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010; Ng et al., 2010; Smith, 2010).

Millennial workers who have extensive cross-cultural education and work experience are increasingly common. As global flows of resources, information and people are increasing, young workers with educational and/or work experience aboard are highly valued by many employers. In this study, we focus on a group of Millennial-age migrants who are considered important in an emerging economy – young Chinese returnees who have both studied and worked abroad before returning to their home country (Conlin, 2007; Li, 2005). The study focuses specifically on Chinese millennial returnees in their twenties and early thirties and uncovers details regarding their career expectations and transitions in the process of migrating back to their homeland, China.

Although China is the most populated country in the world, it still faces a talent shortage as many of its educated population choose to move and stay abroad (Tung, 2007), thus young Chinese returnees have been deemed highly important to the Chinese economy (Conlin, 2007; Li, 2005). Many of those who do return have experienced unexpected difficulties in finding ideal jobs. Therefore, stories about “job-waiting returnees” or “hai dai”
Early career transition of Chinese Millennials

(Sea)weeds) have become common (Hu, 2006; Zhou, 2004). Of concern to
the Chinese government as well as Chinese business owners and manag­
ers is how Chinese returnees can successfully transition into successful
employment quickly and productively.

We conducted a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with
15 young Chinese returnees, who returned to the People’s Republic of
China after both studying and working overseas. Based on the career
transition model (Nicholson and Arnold, 1989), we examined the career
expectations and career development of the young Chinese returnees at
four stages: expectations/anticipation, encounter, adjustment and stabil­
ization. Our research participants demonstrated that career expectations
of young Chinese returnees are a balance between the expectations of
Western Millennials such as career advancement and work–life balance
(for example, De Hauw and De Vos, 2010; De Vos et al., 2009; Ng et al.,
2010) and expectations that are more Chinese, such as hoping to help build
China’s economy communally.

As China is a large and very diverse country, we assessed the career tran­
sitions of migrants from Hong Kong and Macau as well as from mainland
China. Fong (2011) explained that although “Hong Kong, Taiwan, and
Macao are recognized by most countries as part of ‘China,’ they are histor­
ically, socially, economically, politically, demographically quite different
from mainland China” (p. 34). We found potentially important distinc­
tions between the two groups of Millennials that impacted their career
transitions and that will be of interest to career scholars and employers.

In general, our interviews showed that the expectations and attitudes of
returnees typically shift and change through the process of their return­
ing to China and integrating their careers back into the Chinese society.
The transition for Chinese returnees from studying and working abroad
into a career in China is not straightforward or easy. This chapter offers
some avenues for improving the transition processes of Chinese Millennial
returnees, as well as raises new questions and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Career Transitions and the Millennial Generation

To understand career transition patterns of younger employees, Nicholson
and Arnold (1989) found that career transitions from higher education to
employment consist of four phases: preparation/anticipation, encounter,
adjustment and stabilization. During the preparation/anticipation stage,
college students and recent graduates are mentally preparing for their
transition into the work world. They are developing their expectations for what the work world will be like, how much they will get paid, and how quickly and in what directions their careers will advance. During the encounter phase, they enter the work world through particular organizations and typically experience some surprise, or shock, as they encounter aspects of work that they did not expect. As they begin to shift their expectations, they enter the adjustment phase, and over time they slowly enter a stabilization phase where they are comfortable in the workplace and have developed more realistic plans for their long-term futures.

Career expectations and transitions are shaped by a range of factors in the cultural, social, political and economic environments (Schein, 2006), and studies have found that career expectations vary by culture (Lindorff, 2010). The internationalization of labor markets (Kuptsch, 2010) has led to accelerated “cross-border mobility of people, capital and knowledge” (Yang and Qiu, 2010, p. 19). International migrants bring the culture, knowledge and expectations from their home countries to new locations, and experience their career transitions within multiple national cultures.

In the case of the Millennial generation, research has been undertaken in order to understand their career expectations so that they can be better understood in the workplace. Studies done in the US and Canada have indicated that this group of workers feels more entitled than previous generations, and has particularly high expectations, for job satisfaction and salary levels. They are also interested in advancing their careers quickly (Ng et al., 2010) and, following the trend of the rise of “boundaryless careers” (Arthur, 1994; Hall, 1996), are not necessarily interested in long-term employment with one organization. This group needs frequent recognition and looks for meaningful, creative work as well as opportunities to develop themselves further through training opportunities offered by their organizations (Twenge et al., 2010). Millennials also place high value on social connections and work–life balance (De Hauw and De Vos, 2010; De Vos et al., 2009; Ng et al., 2010). While their hopes for their futures are very high, there are indications that this group understands the current economic recession and can temper their expectations accordingly (Ng et al., 2010).

While the research on career expectations of the Millennial generation is abundant, the understanding of their career transitions is limited – most research to date has focused primarily on career expectations. Initial findings on this topic suggest that during the encounter stage of career transition, Millennials who are entering the workplace from college must face a reality they may not have fully expected, particularly during the current economic downturn. While their expectations are high, indications are
that this group can temper their expectations according to the economic conditions (Ng et al., 2010). Many face difficulties, however, as a large number are unemployed, and many Millennials in the US, and increasingly in Canada, have large amounts of student debt that they must pay off. As Deal et al. (2010) explained,

Millennials are having trouble finding work at all (e.g., the unemployment rate for college educated people age 20–24 was 10.6 percent in the third quarter of 2009, the highest since 1983), and their expectations of work have changed. Those who do find work are facing a more difficult path than did some previous generations who did not enter the workforce during a severe recession. (p. 194)

There is much less research that relates to other stages of the career transitions of the Millennial generation, namely, the adjustment and stabilization phases, partly because Millennials are still young. However, indications are that reaching the traditional adjustment and stabilization phases may be difficult for much of the Millennial generation in the West. Transitions are ongoing and part of the norm in the current career world (Briscoe et al., 2006). Fully adjusting to a career and feeling completely stable is difficult in a world of increasing job insecurity. The insecurity is intensified for those at the margins of employment, which includes many young people who do not yet have large bodies of work experience, but are holding large amounts of university-related debt (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) or those who observed that their parents worked all their lives for the same company but were fired during the economic recession (Guthridge et al., 2008). Management scholars and practitioners have recognized that larger numbers of people are being forced to build careers on the basis of temporary and part-time work experiences (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007) and that members of this generation are less likely to be loyal to their employers and tend to build parallel careers (Howe and Strauss, 2000). The Millennial generation seems to be adapting to this world by focusing largely on their individual-level success, changing jobs often as they work to meet their own individual needs (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010). Thus employers complain that retention of Millennials can be difficult (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010). This may be intensified as Millennials advance in their careers. Many strive for quick career advancement and may switch jobs to earn faster career rewards (Ng et al., 2010).

To develop a better understanding of the issues related to career transitions of the Millennial generation, in this study we examined the transition processes engaged in by Chinese Millennial returnees. The study included analyses of their expectations as well as specific challenges at different stages of their career transitions. From these, we drew inferences on how their expectations impacted their overall processes of career transition.
Before we explain our field study, we first introduce the literature on Chinese returnees.

Young Chinese Returnees

Young Chinese returnees were chosen as participants in this study because of their centrality to China's economy and their multi-cultural experiences (Conlin, 2007; Li, 2005). As in other developing countries such as India, a perceived talent shortfall exists in China (Tung, 2007; Zweig, 2006) and attracting and retaining skilled professional labor is a top priority for governmental and organizational leaders in China. Success in attracting young Chinese returnees will ultimately depend upon building an understanding of the career transitions that this group faces when they return to China after having been educated alongside the Millennial generation in the West. Learning more about the realities this group faces — their disappointments as well as their successes — is crucial.

Chinese Millennials were born in the era of China's One Child Policy, enacted in 1979. This policy has meant that the majority of Chinese Millennials are "singletons," or the only children in their families (Fong, 2011). Thus, in comparison to prior generations, Millennials have had more access to the attention of their parents and grandparents as well as access to more money and other resources. Their singleton status combined with the opening up of China in 1978 has meant that Chinese Millennials also have had more opportunities to travel than previous generations, and many have chosen to study abroad (Yi et al., 2010). Zweig and Han (2010) reported that since China opened in 1978 "more than one million students went abroad between 1978 and 2007, of which 70 percent went overseas after 2000" (p. 89).

In her extensive study of young Chinese students abroad, Fong (2011) found that many Chinese migrants planned to return to China. They hoped to live as social and cultural citizens of the developed world even if they returned to China and kept their legal status in their home country. Fong explained,

In the long run . . . they believed that they would be happier and have more economic opportunities in China than they would abroad. This view became especially prevalent after the global financial crisis of 2008–2010, when China's relative economic resilience suggested to many in China and abroad that China was likely to become a developed country sooner rather than later. (p. 192)

Tung's (2007) research also reported that Chinese students feel positive about returning to China after graduating from university in North America. Chinese returnees, however, face the dilemma that Chinese
domestic graduates face, and that is the large expansion in the number of university graduates in China. Now more educated citizens are competing for jobs in China (Zweig and Han, 2010).

While success stories of Chinese returnees in the popular press abound, the reality of building a career as a returnee may be difficult to achieve, particularly for those who did not attend elite universities abroad. Young Chinese, who were raised in China and educated as peers with Western Millennials, may understand their career paths to be extremely promising but, as we found in this study, often faced another reality when they returned to China. Chinese returnees may not be as familiar with the Chinese “rules of the game” as the Chinese natives who never migrated (Zikic et al., 2010). Zweig and Han (2010) have found that returnees, on average do successfully transit back to China over time, and tend to earn salaries higher than those who never traveled abroad. However, we know little about the details of these transition processes. Therefore, we conducted an exploratory study as described below.

METHODOLOGY

We used a qualitative and inductive research design with data gathered through interviews conducted between June and August of 2011. The sample included 15 Chinese returnees, all in the Millennial generation. As we were interested in understanding the career transition process of Millennials, our participants were on the older end of the Millennial Generation and in their late 20s or early 30s. In this way we were able to discuss with them their career expectations and first encounters with a job in China, as well as their adjustment and stabilization processes. All participants have gone through at least three of the four stages of their career transition, ensuring the validity of comparison. Numbers of participants were restricted to 15 to facilitate the in-depth consideration of accounts. Such limited numbers are not unusual in the field, and in-depth narrative career studies have been instrumental in advancing career theory (El-Sawad, 2005; Nicholson and West, 1989).

The major goal of the present study was to develop an initial theoretical understanding of Chinese Millennial returnees’ career transitions grounded in real data. We used personal contacts to locate willing participants in China, a process that is often necessary when undertaking international research (Richardson and Mallon, 2005) especially in a collectivist culture where the emphasis is on interpersonal relationships. Personal relations, or guanxi in Chinese, are crucial in China due to the relational nature of the society and the general low level of trust in
Managing the new workforce

Table 5.1 Millennial Chinese returnees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years abroad</th>
<th>Years since return</th>
<th>Location abroad</th>
<th>Location in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Macau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JA</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Macau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YH</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Chongqing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AK</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Macau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HZ</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Chongqing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DY</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Academia</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Chongqing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Macau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XZ</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>Chongqing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YK</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Urban planning</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Chongqing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XP</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Chongqing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IA</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Macau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PZ</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Macau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GZ</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

out-group members (Guo and Giaccobe-Miller, 2010; Yang, 1994), so in this study the authors used their own personal guanxi (for example, former classmates, colleagues, friends and so on) to identify the potential participants of the study.

Data were gathered through six telephone and nine face-to-face interviews. Interviews were conducted in both English and Chinese by the authors. Interviews conducted in Chinese were translated into English for analysis. All face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The telephone interviews were not recorded, as several participants indicated discomfort with the method. During the telephone interviews extensive notes were taken and immediately after each interview the notes were edited into detailed descriptions of the conversations.

Overall the interviewees represented a broad array of international experiences. All participants went to mid-ranked universities abroad. The host countries included the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, France and Algeria. As Table 5.1 shows, eight of the participants came from major cities in mainland China; six from Macau; and one from Hong Kong. All participants both studied and worked while living outside China. One participant, DM, spent most of his life in Canada after
moving there as a small child with his family. Although his story is distinct from those who left China as university students, DM considered himself a returnee, not an immigrant from Canada. He was raised as Chinese in Canada, and he represents part of the population that the Chinese government and other Chinese leaders are trying to recruit back to China. The majority of our participants were only children, and this was an important consideration for many of them in making their decisions to return to China.

In order to understand the subjective career expectations and experiences (Khapova et al., 2007) of Chinese Millennial returnees, we looked at their own understandings of their careers and the transitions they made from university and living abroad into a career in China. During each interview, a series of open-ended questions were asked in order to elicit narratives (Cohen and Mallon, 2001) regarding the education, travel and work experiences of the interviewees. We focused many of our questions on uncovering the career transitions of young Chinese returnees, eliciting accounts in which participants could describe and interpret their experiences of building their careers in their own words. Specifically, we asked the interviewees to describe (1) expectations; (2) their adjustments back to China and to working in China; (3) their current jobs; and (4) their future career plans. We also asked them what their recommendations would be to future Chinese returnees, which allowed for further insight into the challenges they faced in their career transitions.

All names of the interviewees have been changed to letters in order to maintain confidentiality. Data analysis in this study closely followed two major steps typical in inductive multi-case research (for example, Graebner, 2004; Graeabner and Eisenhardt, 2004): conducting within-case and then cross-case analyses. The within-case analysis focused on applying existing theories and concepts in describing career experiences at all four stages for each of the participating Chinese returnees. For each individual case, we first content-analysed the qualitative data along four stages of the career transitions (Nicholson and Arnold, 1989) of the Chinese returnees. Specifically, we examined (1) the practices engaged by Chinese returnees to prepare for the return; (2) positive and negative experiences during the encounter stage; and (3) adjustment strategies used to reach; (4) stabilization in China. After we examined the individual case for each participant, we conducted cross-case analyses. Specifically, we investigated whether similar or different career themes and patterns emerged in multiple cases. After the cross-case analyses were done, we then re-examined the original interview transcripts to ensure that the identified common themes were consistent with the data. We report the major findings below.
FINDINGS: UNCOVERING THE “ROCKY ROAD” OF RETURNEES’ CAREER TRANSITIONS

Our participants had a wide variety of backgrounds in China and experiences in their host countries. While their reasons for returning to China and experiences transitioning back varied, we were able to identify several patterns that offer significant insight into how those transitions happened and how organizational leaders and returnees themselves may be able to ease the transitions of future returnees. In this section we discuss each of the transition phases and the patterns that we uncovered. Following this section, we include a recommendations section that draws from the recommendations offered directly from returnees along with our own analyses. It provides practical advice for returnees and their managers who hope to make career transitions more successful.

Table 5.2 compares the stages of career transitions of North American Millennials to those of Chinese Millennial returnees. We found that Chinese returnees had high expectations for their careers upon their return to China. Many felt that China offered them opportunities to take part in a rapidly rising economy. Several mentioned that they felt they could make a difference in China and be part of a collective movement to improve the country. During the encounter phase, most of our participants had to deal with the fact that they needed to build or rebuild their guanxi, or social connections in China. Several were stuck without employment for many months, a commonly reported problem for returnees (Zweig and Han, 2010).

In general, all the returnees needed to adjust back to the traditions and cultures of China’s collectivist culture. Both the encounter and adjustment phases were impacted by whether or not the returnee decided to or had the opportunity to work for a Western organization in China, rather than a Chinese organization, and whether they were working in the mainland of China or in Macau or Hong Kong. Those who worked for Western organizations or companies with international backgrounds had less difficulty adjusting, and felt they could readily use their Chinese backgrounds as well as their overseas’ educations. However, those who worked for local Chinese organizations had more difficulty fitting back in. Moreover, those working in Hong Kong or Macau also seemed more positive and confident about their experiences returning to China and their future opportunities.

The stabilization phase involved defining long-term plans for careers and family in China. Our participants in their early 30s were more likely to discuss their careers in terms of having reached a stability phase. Our findings here suggest that as returnees adjusted to unstable career transitions in China, they were balancing their early expectations of great career
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career stage</th>
<th>North American Millennial generation</th>
<th>Chinese returnees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation/Anticipation</td>
<td>High expectations for salary and career development (Ng et al., 2010)</td>
<td>Expectations for more job opportunities in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High expectations for work-life balance (e.g., De Hauw and De Vos, 2010; De Vos et al., 2009; Ng et al., 2010)</td>
<td>Expect rapid career development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expect to change jobs often (Ng et al., 2010)</td>
<td>Expect to build Chinese economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High unemployment (Deal et al., 2010)</td>
<td>Pressure from family to return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College debt (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Deal et al., 2010)</td>
<td>Unemployment for returnees <em>(hai dai)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encounter</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognized the need to rebuild social network or <em>guanxi</em> decision about working for Chinese organization or Western organization’s Chinese operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Encountering traditional Chinese values in the context of career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>Able to adjust expectations to reality (Ng et al., 2010)</td>
<td>Able to adjust expectations to reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on individual-level career success (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010)</td>
<td>Continual rebuilding of <em>guanxilirenmai</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Defining “career success” through both individual and community values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabilization</td>
<td>Career stability difficult to achieve in “boundaryless” world (Briscoe et al., 2006)</td>
<td>Finding a balance between earlier expectations and reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retention of Millennials can be difficult (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010)</td>
<td>Returnees to Hong Kong and Macau – defining success in more entrepreneurial or creative terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Returnees to mainland China – more modest in their definitions of career success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
opportunities (typically held not just by themselves but also families) with
the reality of building a career in their homeland after being away for a
number of years. Below we provide more details about these findings.

Preparation/Anticipation

During the preparation/anticipation stage, the Chinese returnees made
decisions to return to China. The decisions were mostly made due to the
perceived abundance in opportunities of building careers in China. For
example, DM, one participant who moved back to China after spending
most of his life in Canada, explained that he moved back because he had
heard that the opportunities in Asia were very strong for young people.

I can’t verify it right now, but from what I’m told and what I’ve observed is
people in my age group they will probably stand more chance making it big in
Asia versus in Canada... For young people Asia will have more opportuni­
ties, but I don’t know if it is a myth or not because I don’t know yet how the
landscape is. (DM)

To make these decisions, the Chinese returnees conducted self-assessments of
the value of knowledge and skills they acquired abroad that might facilitate
their career building in China. They also evaluated the resources that they
needed to make their transitions successful. For most of our participants,
navigating the return to China and beginning a career there began with
considerations regarding how to use their prior social networks in China to
make initial contacts with potential employers, especially organizations that
had international backgrounds such as multinational corporations (MNCs)
and international organizations. While the knowledge and skills acquired
abroad may facilitate the Chinese returnees’ career building in China, as
several of our interviewees pointed out, being away from a home country
too long will endanger one’s renmai and guanxi (or social connections) and
therefore the access to the most updated information of the labor market
and resources when they return to China. As IW explained:

The four-year abroad stay did cost me something, that is, “renmai,” for
example, some of my old friends retired [during my stay abroad], so I need to
establish new connections again. So when I was hesitating about whether stay
or return, one of my friends told me, if you decide to come back anyway, the
earlier the better, because the longer you stay abroad, the more friends and con­
nections you will lose in China. (IW)

Several of our participants were able to visit China before their
expected return and made direct contacts during their temporary visits.
We also identified the strategy of finding a job abroad that would allow
the participant to return to China. For example, GZ, who worked for an MNC in the US, asked to be relocated in the company’s office in China, and XP found a job in the US that allowed him to immediately move back to China. GZ, who studied economics and worked in banking in Canada, felt that his experience abroad was highly valued. He explained,

I think people who have studied abroad actually have better opportunities because a lot of foreign banks [in Hong Kong] quite prefer to hire students who have international exposure. So, of course, they will also consider to hire people who are from Hong Kong University or Chinese University but I will say, from what I’ve seen, the majority of the [new staff] who join the bank, I will say 80 percent of them, actually came from overseas. (GZ)

Almost all returnees with work experience indicated that they aimed at obtaining a higher-ranking position upon return to China. Those with no prior work experience were looking for a job that could allow them to use their knowledge and skills. Our findings also showed that, similar to Western Millennials, Chinese Millennial returnees also had high expectations for their careers. They hoped for challenging and interesting work that could utilize what they learned abroad and make positive and long-term impacts on China’s future. However, in the encounter phase, most of our returnees learned that their expectations were quite different from reality.

**Encounter**

Our data suggested that during the encounter stage the organization that gave the returnees their first job upon return seemed to have an impact on Chinese Millennial returnees’ experiences. Once they returned to China the experiences of each of our interviewees can be divided into those who managed to find a job in organizations that were Chinese subsidiaries of Western organizations (for example, GZ, YH, XP, BM) and those who found jobs in local Chinese organizations (for example, DM, YK, DY, PL, JA, AK, HZ, MA, XZ, IA, PZ). The former group of migrants seemed to have had more positive experiences than the latter. The interviewees who worked for Western organizations were particularly satisfied with the clarity the organizations offered regarding career paths as well as the more open and informal work environments. They indicated that they were able to not only use their knowledge and creativity but also their Chinese backgrounds to act as liaisons between the company and the external environment.

The returnees who settled in local Chinese organizations indicated that they had difficulties in adapting to hierarchical and rigid work cultures and found that organizational politics played a larger role than they expected
in the work environment. YK and DY said that they ended up being silent and playing the game rather than creating resistance, which would just result in possible retaliations. PL and BM indicated that they intended to change jobs frequently in order to have access to more opportunities to develop, learn about other industries and possibly get salary increases. DM mentioned that he could not adapt well in the beginning and for six months just thought about leaving the country again, which he did not do after considering his family interests. At this stage almost all interviewees, regardless of where they worked, said that it was essential to continue expanding and diversifying their social networks to be aware of new opportunities.

During the encounter stage, most of the Chinese returnees in our study experienced a second culture shock due to differences in the living and the working environments between their host countries and their home country. For example, YK, who lived in mainland China, commented,

> Of course there is some incompatibility of my personal values now and values prevalent in the Chinese society. If you stayed abroad before, especially in Western countries, you know the work is not everything. Work is work, and they value the quality of life as well. However, in China the overall perception is that work is everything and you have to schedule your personal life around your work, not vice versa. Another thing is that people in Western societies are self-oriented and the culture also promotes differences in individuals and the values of individuals. Here in China you see the opposite, a very high level of collectivism. If your personal interest is not consistent with the interest of the group, you may need to sacrifice your personal interest. (YK)

Those participants who had not spent time developing or redeveloping their ren mai before returning had the greatest difficulties getting through the encounter phase of transition. As YH, also from the mainland, explains,

> If you stay abroad too long, what you lose most is the time to cultivate ren mai or your personal social network. Because China is a resource-based society, to succeed you either need to have natural resources or your social resources, your guanxi network. (YH)

Moreover, as more Chinese return to their homeland they must contend with the fact that their studies and/or work abroad are not immediately appreciated and they are not as valuable in the Chinese marketplace as they might have hoped. The phenomenon, hai dai, or job waiting, has become well known in China. While most of our participants were able to find work upon return to China, several of our participants did experience large periods of hai dai. As XZ explained,
After I made my decision to return, I just quit my job in Algeria. I stayed unemployed, or "hai dai," for almost six months after I returned. I needed some time to adjust myself to my home yet "unfamiliar" culture. (XZ)

While the group of Chinese returnees has become larger and increasingly influential, the individuals within the group must contend with the fact that they are each only one of many, and will need to continue working hard on crafting their careers upon their returns to China. Moreover, the fact that in the past few years students who wanted to "gild" their résumé by attending less than reputable overseas' schools or easy to get certificate programs has dropped the "overall quality of sea turtles" and made the already difficulty return process even more challenging. DY, who saw many of his peers struggling to find work, suggested,

Many people think returnees have guaranteed competitive advantage in the job market. That might have been true ten years ago, but not anymore. You've got to bring something valuable to your employers to be put in an important position. If the only goal of going abroad is to be able to "muddle along and make easy money" in China, going abroad has lost its value. (DY)

DM, who worked in Macau, expressed the difficulties in finding employment in China in slightly different, more positive terms.

There's no ready-made opportunity [here in China] you have to go – you have to be entrepreneur and make it happen yourself . . . You see it, you see the needs here but nobody is aware of . . . So there is no ready-made opportunity, there's no needs that's perceived already, but you kind of have to like take the first step, make the cow bell ring and then they can see it. (DM)

DM was excited to face the challenges that demanded entrepreneurialism, while our participants from the mainland were more concerned with the negative aspects of returning to China and potentially remaining unemployed for a long period of time. Despite their often expensive educations and international experiences, our participants could not simply come home and easily find employment. They needed to make their own opportunities, as DM stated above.

Adjustment

Having passed the initial encounter our return migrants discussed either short-term or long-term strategies that helped them adjust and plan for a future that would be somewhat distinct from their earlier plans. Interviewees who had less work experience mentioned adjusting to cultural differences in China, such as the extreme prevalence of organizational
politics or the need to develop guanxi. Discussions of more long-term strategies were initiated primarily by our interviewees with at least several years of prior work experience. Several of these participants considered themselves to be more entrepreneurial. They were thinking about reaching top management positions, starting their own businesses and reconnecting with their social networks overseas. XZ and DM were not satisfied with their current jobs and stated that their interests were to start their own companies. Both were disappointed with social services in China (education and community development) and intended to start their own ventures.

To adjust in China, most of our participants changed jobs voluntarily at least once since their return to China. Several found some unexpected difficulties while searching for the right career. MA told us,

[My career] is like a rocky road because I have changed my job quite a few times and not in the same field, and it took me a long time to think of what kind of career I want to pursue. (MA)

Many of our participants started out with jobs that were not their “dream jobs,” and then moved to others. As DY explained,

Although my long-term goal is not [my current position], I do perceive this job to be a good transition platform where I can clarify the direction of future career development and find a better area that fits my personal interest. (DY)

Changing jobs often was difficult for many of our participants, as they felt their careers were not normal according to Chinese standards. For example, PL quit a job recently and expressed her negative feelings about the move,

Every time you move to a new place or situation you don’t feel good, of course, sometimes you will give up. But in my case I just decided to go. (PL)

In the above quotation PL makes the decision sound easy, but at another point in the interview she explained that it took her a year and a half to make the decision. As she explained, the decisions were difficult in part because they were considered outside the Chinese cultural norms, therefore she needed time and courage to make several “moves” to settle down. Similarly, MA, who moved from the real estate industry to an education marketing company, found the decision to change jobs difficult but necessary.

Stabilization

In general, the stabilization phase for millennial returnees to China seemed to be less “stable” and more of an ongoing process of adjustment.
Returning to China, beginning a career and stabilizing over time did not happen as a linear process for many of our participants. Before returning to China from study and work in France, DY believed his experience would lead to easy success in his home country. Instead he found that he had learned less than he had thought and could not apply much of what he had learned in Europe in a Chinese context. Returning to work in China meant finding a new “balance.” DY described his anticipation, encounter and ongoing adjustment:

I am still balancing the dream and the reality. When I got two Master’s degrees from a decent university in France, I thought I can do lots of things, because I have learned a lot and have seen a lot while many people in China cannot. But when I came back, I just realized how little I actually learned and how little I can actually use what I have learned abroad in reality. So from the job offered by these two Shanghai companies to now the faculty position in a university, I see myself approaching the balance point between what I think I can do and what I can actually do in reality. I think success does not really depend on how much you can achieve but rather on whether you could find the balance point between your dream and the reality. If you could find that balance point, you are a successful person. And my goal of the career development is to try my best to reach that balance point. (DY)

Several participants expressed their frustration at not being able to find work that would help them impact China positively. In other cases, young Chinese returnees felt that what they learned abroad does not necessarily apply to the Chinese context, and found this a difficult lesson to learn. Despite difficulties with the encounter and adjustment phases of career transition our participants were very hopeful about the future. As HY explained,

My career has been like “going through the mist” for the past five years. I mean career development is like designing your life. I was not very sure in the beginning about what I wanted, what’s my real interest… now I work in a position that matches my interest, my background, and my ability. As I look back, I am really learning by doing. (HZ)

Recommendations

When asked about recommendations for future return migrants, our interviewees indicated that work experience abroad makes a difference and is usually directly related to higher confidence and higher employability. Thus, several of our participants felt that potential returnees should make an effort to gain work experience while staying abroad. Second, several mentioned a concern with limited creativity and openness in China. Our
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participants felt that prospective returnees should understand that while the current rate of economic development in China is rapid, certain aspects of Chinese organizations (for example, organizational culture, decision making, workplace relationships) still remain traditional and are based on industrial principles and norms. Return migrants should understand that China is still in transition from an industrial to an information society and should adjust their expectations accordingly, or find work within a Western organization’s Chinese operations. Third, networking was crucial in all stages of the career transitions. Our interviewees suggested three types of networks that need to be developed: family, friends and government officials.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study represents an initial effort to explore the career transitions of the Millennials with cross-cultural experiences. Our interpretive analysis of the career expectations and early career development of young Chinese returnees provides an empirical illustration of the career transition stage model by Nicholson and Arnold (1989). All the participants were on the older end of the Millennial generation, and thus were able to provide insight into the overall process of career transition. Although our research is limited by its small sample size, it does provide rich data from Millennial returnees in an emerging economy, China. Our findings generate several implications for career theorists and practitioners, which should be followed up on in future research.

First, our findings show that the Chinese Millennial returnees in our study have struggled (or are still struggling) to build successful careers upon their return to China after spending years abroad. Although they had romantic visions of what they would encounter abroad or upon their return to their home country, they all found much unexpected hard work still to be done – they were entering the unknown. Most of our participants had changed jobs and even industries once or several times within several years after their returns, and constantly found themselves in positions they could not have imagined when they first chose to study or work abroad. Several of our subjects, however, still hope to use their experience abroad in ways that impact China meaningfully by actively participating in China’s economic development process.

In addition, we found that, in contrast to traditional “advancement-oriented” (Buzzanell and Goldzwig, 1991) career development patterns, our participants mostly followed non-linear career transition models. The Chinese Millennials in our study used metaphors, such as “balancing
the dream and reality" and “going through the mist” to illustrate their attempts to use their past experiences while continuously working to readapt to their homeland. More importantly, the non-linear models remind us that individual career transitions and development are not only guided by their personal job preferences, but also are embedded in larger social, economic and political contexts. As Millennials moved across the national borders to build their careers, their career moves and development patterns may also have been shaped and bounded by these contextual factors. As Buzzanell and Goldzwig (1991) correctly pointed out, organizational and environmental changes such as economic downturns and organizational downsizing or flattening require the re-envisioning of career possibilities.

Third, our findings suggest that career transition is a multi-dimensional and rich process as individuals themselves continuously change what that means for them. We found that as individuals move into unknown environments – a characteristic of migrants – they continuously redefine the meaning of career. For example, for our subjects, career could mean to be an expert, to perform well, to be respected, to learn, to access opportunities, to have freedom, to follow one’s own passion, to have social impact and to gain more power. In short, the fluid meaning of career requires us to expand the perspectives beyond the mere professional and industrial scope to include other dimensions such as family, culture and tradition.

In China, where change happens almost daily and economic reform is the norm, career transition patterns mirror these social changes. Besides the economic and financial resources available to individuals, the “reality” of the home country’s economy, society and other institutional factors has great influence on the Chinese Millennials’ career experiences. From this perspective future career research can benefit by incorporating macro-economic and social patterns into analysis.

The present study also generated a few implications for individuals of the Millennial group who plan to have cross-cultural career experiences as well as for business practitioners who may need to manage the Millennial group in China. There is no question that China’s economic development and abundant employment opportunities have attracted increasingly more young Chinese people to migrate back to their home country. Despite their high anticipation and enthusiasm, however, they experienced a second “cultural shock” and challenging encounter and adjustment stages; that is, they had difficulties in readjusting to their own homeland due to unrealistic expectations and long separations from the Chinese labor market. When making career moves across cultural borders, the Millennials should not, for example, immediately expect salaries commensurate with the costs of their overseas’ education.
Moreover, the more strategic potential Chinese returnees use to maintain their networks from abroad, the better their chances of building a successful career when they return home. As Cassarino (2004) pointed out, many returnees fail because they have remained too long outside their societies of origin and they have lost their networks of social relationships. From this perspective, Chinese Millennials, while abroad, should stay actively in contact with their social networks in China. As access to technology in China improves, specifically access to networking tools is also enhanced. Lastly, the Millennials should be aware that the differences in the cultural values and norms in their host countries and their home country may facilitate or impede their career development. From this perspective, Millennials should develop skills to understand and cope with these differences as they make global career moves.

Despite some difficulties, young returnees to China have strong potential to build extremely successful careers, and this potential can be improved with support from managers of young Chinese returnees. Our interviews revealed the complications of beginning a career in China after a number of years abroad, so managers of this group will be well served if they aid returnees in balancing their expectations on return to China by encouraging them to use their skills learned internationally in incorporating their work lives back into Chinese society where traditional Chinese values are still strong. While Western Millennials expect to change jobs often, our participants mostly hoped to find stability in their careers in China. This group is looking to help build the Chinese economy, but they have lost some of their guanxi, or social network, critical to career and social success in China. As the ability to virtually network in China improves, the ability for returnees to maintain their network while abroad should improve their career transitions upon return to China. As our data show, employers and other leaders in China, who can help this group overcome some challenges and build their careers, will have access to a group that is passionate, driven and knowledgeable about the global economy and ready to help build the Chinese economy.

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