

CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF CHINESE SELF-INITIATED EARLY CAREER EXPATRIATES IN HUNGARY – TWO-STEP MIGRATION PATHWAY PERSPECTIVE?

PÁLYAKEZDŐ KÍNAI EXPATRIÓTÁK KARRIERPÁLYÁI MAGYARORSZÁGON – KÉTLÉPCSŐS MIGRÁCIÓS ÚT PERSPEKTÍVÁJA?

This paper explores the career trajectories of Chinese self-initiated expatriates who relocated to Hungary to study and evaluate their career prospects abroad. By examining the two-step migration pathway, this paper uncovers the relative merits of three potential career choices, namely whether to return, remain in Hungary, or move to another European country. This research employs a constructivist grounded theory approach with semi-structured interviews with 22 Chinese graduates. Additional qualitative data, including observations, textual analyses of publicly available testimonies, and a research diary, complement the study. The findings reveal ambiguity in the advantages and disadvantages of each potential choice. The empirical material suggests that women face even greater challenges in this regard, as they experience considerable pressure to start a family, preferably in China. As a result, their self-initiated expatriation intentions are often played down. The study also highlights the difficulties of transferring social, cultural, and career capital into a new environment.

Keywords: self-initiated expatriates, early-career expatriates, Chinese expatriates, Hungary, career trajectories

Ez a cikk a Magyarországra tanulmányi céllal áttelepült kínai expatrióták karrierpályáit tárja fel, és értékeli a külföldi karrierlehetőségeiket. A kétlépcsős migrációs út vizsgálatával három lehetséges pályaválasztás egymáshoz viszonyított előnyeit és hátrányait tárja fel, nevezetesen, hogy visszatér Kínába, Magyarországon marad, vagy másik európai országba költözik. Ez a kutatás konstruktivista grounded theory megközelítést alkalmaz, félig strukturált interjúkkal 22 kínai expatriótával. További kvalitatív adatok, például megfigyelés, nyilvánosan elérhető tanúvallomások szöveges elemzése és kutatási napló egészítik ki a tanulmányt. Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy minden potenciális választásnak egyaránt van előnye és hátránya, és a választás bizonytalan. Az empirikus anyag arra utal, hogy a nők ezen a téren még nagyobb kihívásokkal néznek szembe, mivel jelentős nyomás nehezedik rájuk, hogy családot alapítsanak, lehetőleg Kínában. Ebből kifolyólag gyakran elvetik a nemzetközi karrierterveiket. A kutatás azt is megmutatta, hogy a kínai pályakezdő expatrióták milyen nehézségekbe ütköznek a társadalmi, kulturális és karriertőke új környezetbe való áthelyezése miatt.

Kulcsszavak: nem vállalati kiküldöttek (self-initiated expatriates, SIE), pályakezdő külföldiek, kínai expatrióták, Magyarország, karrierpályák

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Authors/Szerzők:

Dr. Xueyan Li^a (lixueyan@ahtcm.edu.cn) lecturer; Dr. Henriett Primecz^b (henriett.primecz@jku.at) professor

^aAnhui University of Chinese Medicine (Anhui Kínai Orvosi Egyetem) China (Kína); ^bJohannes Kepler University (Johannes Kepler Egyetem) Austria (Ausztria)

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Self-initiated expatriates are typically understood as professionals moving from the Western European or Anglo-Saxon countries to any other countries of their choice, be it another Western or Anglo-Saxon country, or a developing country (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013). Definitions mainly focus on the intention to work. While individuals moving from a developing country to a Western country often labelled as migrants, and Westerners relocating to other countries are typically referred to as self-initiated expatriates, regardless of their employment or work integration goals. Consequently, a large proportion of global mobility is excluded when self-initiated expatriation is examined. This study focuses on Chinese self-initiated expatriates who pursued employment opportunities in Hungary after having studied abroad. This investigation is specific because it considers Chinese mobile professionals as self-initiated expatriates who face visa restrictions that limit their international mobility, unlike for many Western professionals.

Self-initiated expatriation enhances global careers with international experience (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Donald et al., 2018; Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). While this could be accurate for Western self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), self-initiated expatriation from China may have a distinct effect, especially for mobile professionals from lower middle-class backgrounds, with limited social and cultural capital, where higher education only incrementally increases their prospects. This paper discusses how social and cultural capital increases for lower middle-class Chinese self-initiated expatriates, the limitations they face in deciding where to relocate, and how they can potentially enhance their social and cultural capital by choosing Hungary, located on the global semi-periphery, but still in the European Union.

This paper aims to contribute to the theories of self-initiated expatriation, particularly on the two-step migration pathway theory (Hawthorne, 2010). After defining terms and reviewing theories on career capital and two-step migration, the context of Chinese SIEs in Hungary and its influence on the theories are explained as an important element. Research questions focus on career options, career challenges, and potential cultural and social capital accumulations of Chinese SIEs. To answer the research questions, 22 Chinese early career SIEs in Hungary were interviewed, observed and their social media testimonies collected. The qualitative data were analysed in a constructivist framework. The next section presents the findings on agency in early career trajectories, including the agency of repatriation, the agency of remaining and agency of mobility, followed by the discussion. The final section summarises the paper's conclusion.

Theoretical framework and research context

Cultural, social and career capital theories

As part of the discourse of modernisation in China, students are encouraged to accumulate cultural and social capital via overseas tertiary education at both the individual and macroeconomic levels (Li, 2020). International

student mobility can help students accumulate multiple forms of capital, such as human (Becker, 1964; Dustmann et al., 2011), social (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), cultural (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and economic (Lu, 2015, 2018; Wong et al., 2015). Career capital – knowing-why, knowing-how and knowing-whom – is a key asset for career pursuit, especially in early stages and influenced by international mobility (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Educational institutions and context[s] influence it greatly (Donald et al., 2018).

Accumulating such forms of capital is perceived as extremely important, especially in early career stages. Al Ariss (2012) argues that by acknowledging the contextual character of professions, SIEs may obtain a more nuanced view of international careers in their respective geographical, historical, institutional, and organizational contexts. This is why context-rich in-depth investigation is needed. Bamberger (2020) suggests that self-initiated expatriation can provide international students with an opportunity to develop a cosmopolitan identity by accumulating mobility capital. Upward mobility benefits individuals by allowing them to accumulate cultural capital, which is not only limited to those from affluent backgrounds (Daloz, 2013; Wong et al., 2015). Dimaggio (1982) also notes that cultural capital is a means of upward mobility.

Self-initiated expatriation and early career trajectories

Self-initiated expatriation is widely discussed in the management literature (Dorsch et al., 2012; Finaccord, 2014; Hussain & Deery, 2018; Li et al., 2023). Self-initiated expatriation may be temporary or permanent. Some expatriates intend to return to their home country, while others move on to other countries for their professional careers. Self-initiated expatriates are those who take the initiative to relocate overseas (Andresen et al., 2014; Tharenou, 2015). The boundary between SIEs and other people with international experience is unclear, despite scholars' repeated attempts to clarify the various definitions (Andresen et al., 2014; Cerdin & Selmer, 2014). Some scholars have defined a SIE as an employee who voluntarily migrates for employment opportunities and career development (Andresen & Biemann, 2012; Carr et al., 2005; Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010), whereas others have defined them in more general terms. Briscoe et al. (2009) define SIEs as 'individuals who travel abroad (usually as tourists or students), but who seek work as they travel and are hired in a foreign location.' Both employability and learning are key elements of boundaryless careers, which SIEs are pursuing (Dorsch et al., 2012).

While career development can be regarded as the one major motivation for SIEs to go abroad, there has been some discussion on SIEs' early career trajectories (Pereira et al., 2016; Wechtler, 2018; Li et al., 2023). Researchers have examined the career prospects and obstacles encountered by early career SIEs who may bring fresh perspectives and enthusiasm to their new location. SIEs may encounter challenges in building their careers, including difficulties in accessing professional networks and

overcoming barriers to career advancement. McNulty and Brewster (2017) suggest that SIEs could play a role in management and leadership development, as their experiences can enhance valuable skills such as adaptability, intercultural competence, and leadership, which are sought after by organisations (Li et al., 2023).

However, early career SIEs encounter various obstacles. Waxin and Brewster (2020) examined the influence of host country factors, including culture, language, social networks, and work opportunities, on SIEs' career paths. They found that host country characteristics are critical in determining the career outcomes of SIEs. The authors highlight the importance of language proficiency and social networks in facilitating career advancement and cultivating a sense of belonging in the host country. Seok-Young and Jang (2021) examine the lack of organisational support, which can lead to awkward situations for early career SIEs. Jonbekova et al. (2021) show that international graduates face employment challenges due to factors such as socioeconomic and cultural considerations, as well as intergenerational conflicts. Overall, the transition from university to an early career is expected to influence their self-perception of employability and their prospects of entering the international employment market (Donald et al., 2018).

Two-step-migration pathway of international graduates' self-initiated expatriation

The transition from university to an early career is likely to affect how SIEs view their employability and their ability to enter the global job market (Donald et al., 2018). There is evidence that foreign education is linked to better employment prospects. International education has a "signalling effect" on graduates, providing them with advantages such as English proficiency, solid content knowledge, awareness of international standards, and advanced soft skills, making graduates more appealing to employers and increasing their chances of employment (Abimbola et al., 2016; Jonbekova et al., 2021; Pham, 2020; Wiers- Janssen, 2007; Wu et al., 2020). Hawthorne (2010) coined the term "two-step migration" to describe the phenomenon of former international students seeking employment in their host country instead of returning home after graduation. This contributes to the host country's employment market by providing educated workforce. When international graduates enter the job market and start their career, they differ from local candidates. For instance, early-career SIEs have more mobility ambition and may seek entry-level professional opportunities to gain international experience (Fourage & Ester, 2007). Tharenou's study (2003) on 213 entry-level workers (with an average age of 23) concluded that early-career SIEs had high levels of personal agency and were less influenced by their families. The study used social cognitive career theory, taking age, gender, and marital status into consideration.

Global and multinational organisations consider international graduates an immediate source of labour and a group devoted to work because they gained socio-cultural capital and qualifications from their host

country while studying (Chellaraj et al., 2008; Farivar et al., 2019). Therefore, the international student experience is crucial for adapting to a foreign country during graduate studies and gaining exposure to an international setting, which in turn influences their decision to relocate (Bozionelos et al., 2015). Understanding the early career performance, suitability, selection, and development of international graduates has been recognised as crucial for international human resource management (IHRM) and training development (Israel & Cohen, 2022). Younger employees are more enthusiastic to change career boundaries within emerging new social structures, compared to older employees who may prioritise more generic skills (Currie et al., 2006). Farivar et al. (2019) suggest that foreign graduates' career mobility can be influenced by socio-cultural and working conditions; their findings motivated international graduates to remain in the host country after graduation, even if they originally planned to leave.

Although many young foreign students often have larger social circles, they are perceived as temporarily staying in the host-country and adopt coping strategies when they encounter difficulties. From an economic perspective, a competitive employment market with limited positions (Abimbola et al., 2016; Nachatar Singh, 2020), and high salary expectations in comparison to those offered in the market (Hao & Welch, 2012), make it difficult for graduates to obtain post-graduate employment. Chinese SIEs should recognise and adapt to socioeconomic differences between the host and home countries. Al Ariss & Özbilgin (2010) notes that, particularly in the context of SIE, the education and abilities of SIEs may not be enough to overcome organisational and structural barriers, which hinder their full integration into the job market. In conclusion, the perception of early career SIEs' temporary stay in the host country prompts the adoption of coping strategies to navigate difficulties.

Chinese SIEs in Hungary

Chinese SIEs mainly target Anglo-Saxon and economically advanced Asian countries. While there is extended literature on middle-aged Western expatriates (Shaffer et al., 2012; Yao et al., 2014; Crowley-Henry, 2012), there has been little discussion of the large number of Chinese applicants who aim to study in Hungary. Hungary as a potential destination for the Chinese middle-class couples, whereas the primary motivation is favourable living conditions, desire to provide their children with a joyful childhood, potentially escaping the educational pressure, intense competition, and economic burdens associated with the upbringing of children in China (Beck & Gaspar, 2023; Beck & Nyíri, 2022).

While students have limited access to the employment market, a large number of Chinese professionals seek employment in Hungary. Li (2020) provides a detailed analysis of the push and pull factors that influence Chinese individuals to move to Hungary. Push factors include social and economic changes in China, leading to a highly competitive employment market. Pull

factors include the accessibility of Hungarian education system and a relatively easy access to its employment market compared to other EU and Western countries. However, Chinese students encounter various obstacles, including language barriers and potential exclusion (Primecz & Li, 2022a), as well as individual academic issues regarding “invisible academic performance in the classroom” (Li, 2020). Li and Primecz (2023) describe the socio-economic status of students who eventually enter to this market, and argue that Hungary is a compromise choice for lower middle class and working-class Chinese families, not a country attraction. Furthermore, Li and Primecz (2021) use exploratory-qualitative methods to investigate the future dilemma of Chinese students: their *in-betweenness*.

In Hungary, the number of self-initiated Chinese students saw a significant increase, rising from 725 in 2014 to 2.776 in 2019, and then slightly decreasing to 2.377 in 2022 (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2022). Since 2019, Chinese students have become the second-largest international student community in Hungary, following Germans, and remain the primary group among non-European students. As Chinese early-career SIEs represent a significant and fast-growing group, it is worth exploring whether Chinese students who moved to Hungary choose to remain, return to China, or select a third country for employment.

Previous research has investigated the macro and socioeconomic drivers of turnover among intra-country migrant workers, as well as personal, financial, and knowledge-related motivational factors (Carr et al., 2005; Doherty & Dickmann, 2012). But people and organisations must interact and accept their interdependencies to guarantee the long-term health of the professional ecosystem (Modise, 2016). Additionally, it is recognised that demographic factors also influence mobility. Age is usually decisive (Selmer & Lauring, 2010) and reflects the expatriate’s seniority and work experience. Therefore, most Western expatriates are between 30 and 40 years old (Shaffer et al., 2012). Moving from college to early employment is especially likely to impact self-initiated experiences (Donald et al., 2018).

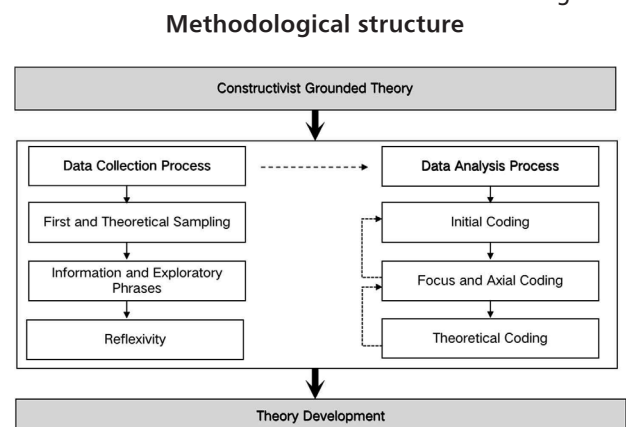
The current paper aims to address the research inquiry by advancing the understanding of career trajectories of Hungarian-graduated Chinese students and how their plans are executed when they face reality. This paper is unique in that it combines the plans and testimonies of students and their actual early career moves. It reveals that the investment in foreign studies can sometimes lead to unique career opportunities for individuals, but in other cases, newly graduated employees face limited career options. The paper aims to explore whether international mobility limits or facilitates career progression with the following research questions: (1) What career options are available to Chinese graduates who completed their studies in Hungary? and (2) What career opportunities and challenges do they face when they choose to remain in Hungary, when they return to China or when they move to another country?

Methodology

While positivist, constructivist, and critical research traditions provide different approaches to the study of expatriation (Primecz, 2020; Szkudlarek et al., 2020), positivism continues to dominate in social sciences and management research more broadly (Symon et al., 2018). Yet, non-mainstream approaches, such as constructivist and critical studies, provide further insights, when it comes to the context-rich analysis of unexplored phenomena, while qualitative research approaches provide an obvious route to context-rich analysis, as they seek an “emic” understanding of the specific professional phenomena under investigation (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010; O’Kane et al., 2021; Symon et al., 2018; Richardson, 2021).

The subjective nature of individuals’ experience of global mobility (Scurry et al., 2013), and the role of qualitative researchers demands reflexivity, displaying awareness of their own experiences and preconceptions throughout the process. Wechtler (2018) suggests that diaries and blogs are rich personal accounts of lived experiences, as they are affective, spontaneous and not distorted by memories. Additionally, the author believes that cross-cultural challenges and the future career directions of Chinese early career SIEs are essentially personal matters. The research design is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Source: first author's compilation

Table 1 shows the details of the sample, including their majors, gender, and length of work experience in Hungary after graduation. The participants’ average age was around 30, which is younger than the average age of other studies on expatriate populations, as the sample consisted of early-career SIEs.

The data for this study was collected from two sources. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author. Secondly, further data was collected from publicly available sources, such as social media, blogs and observation of the Chinese community in Hungary. Collectively, these sources provided the initial data for the study. All research participants agreed to give interviews and provide further data about their life in Hungary, and they submitted informed consent forms. All interviews were audio-recorded

digitally, with their permission, and lasted 60-90 minutes. The anonymity of research participants was guaranteed.

Table 1
Research participants and their demographic data

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Educational level	Major	Work experience in Hungary
F1	Female	33	Master	Economics	3
F2	Female	29	Master	Economics	3
M3	Male	29	Master	Economics	2.5
F4	Female	27	Bachelor	International Relations	2
F5	Female	29	Master	Environment	3
F6	Female	28	Bachelor	Arts	3
F7	Female	29	Master	International Business Law	2
M8	Male	31	Master	Veterinary Medicine	2
F9	Female	34	Master	MBA	2
M10	Male	30	Bachelor	Smelter Engineering	3
M11	Male	30	Bachelor	Mechanical Engineering	3
M12	Male	30	Bachelor	Agronomy	2
F13	Female	29	Master	International Economics and Business	2
M14	Male	29	Master	Medicine	2
M15	Male	35	Ph.D	Biomedical Science	3
M16	Male	33	Ph.D	Dentistry	2
M17	Male	31	Master	Public Health	2
F18	Female	31	Master	Economics	2
M19	Male	33	Master	Public Health	3
M20	Male	30	Bachelor	Economics	2.5
F21	Female	33	Ph.D	Medicine	1
M22	Male	31	Ph.D	Medicine	2

Source: own compilation

The first author’s position as a female Chinese doctoral student in Hungary, who has been living there for more than five years, influenced the research process in multiple ways. The author’s insider status helped in quickly approaching the participants and establishing trusting relationships. To recognize the value of a shared language in building relationships and minimise misunderstandings caused by translation, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin. To prevent the loss of meaning through translation, the transcripts were kept in original form for analytical purposes. Transcripts were forwarded to interviewees before the data analysis, allowing them to review and edit the transcripts for accuracy and privacy (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009), thereby ensuring credibility and legitimacy.

The audio data were transcribed into written Chinese and analysed using NVivo software for coding and categorisation. To minimise biases, the researcher kept a reflective research diary during both data collection and data analysis processes (Guba et al., 2017; Charmaz, 2006, 2020). The diary assisted the researcher in recording her research experience, including first impressions, second thoughts, instantaneous interpretations and overwhelming feelings.

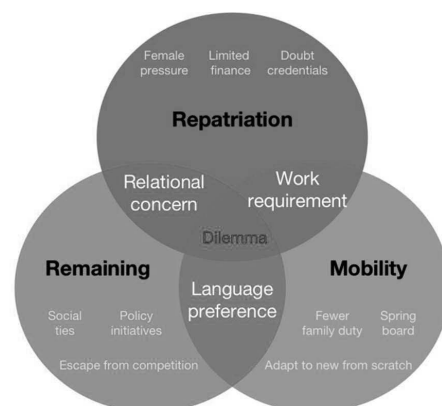
To develop the sampling criteria, the initial step was to screen potential participants and determine if they meet the criteria of being Hungarian-educated Chinese SIEs. Personal contacts were utilised to identify and approach

individuals who fit the required profile (Doherty, 2013). The criteria included: (a) initial intention and expectation of a temporary move at the time of the interview; (b) legal residence and employment in the host country; (c) voluntary move without forced displacement due to factors such as civil war, persecution, political beliefs, or famine; (d) entry to Hungary as a student with subsequent employment initiation. None had acquired the host country’s citizenship, and none had any international work experience before arriving in Hungary.

In the data analysis phase, the three steps of analysis described by Charmaz (2000) – line-by-line coding, axial coding and theoretical coding – are grouped around the researcher’s description of the analysis in this section. The first author analysed the data in Chinese and only translated relevant quotations.

Firstly, for building the *initial codes*, the texts of the transcriptions were read and, for each phrase or paragraph, a remark was provided using terms that summarized the information/concept investigated. While reading the interview transcript, a logbook was created that noted each respondent’s views of the content and the direction of the reading. Secondly, *axial coding* was developed to re-compose data and give coherence to the emerging analysis, highlighting its dimensions and properties within a context. This allowed for more precise explanations that respond to questions of when, where, why, who, how, and with what results of the phenomenon, resulting in a more comprehensive description of the studied experience. Thirdly, *classification* (theoretical codes) provided the comparison of categories on a more sophisticated level because it “provides the researcher with the logic to arrange his investigation and a means to build and enhance the theoretical links that urge him to compare the categories” (Charmaz, 2020). The constructivist grounded theory approach was employed to ask Chinese SIEs participants the three connected research questions through interviewing procedures. This resulted in the inductive identification and development of ideas from the data. Extracts of three levels of coding and theoretical coding are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Agencies of Chinese early career self-initiated expatriate in Hungary



Source: first author’s compilation

Findings

The participants had three options for their early career after studying in Hungary: repatriation, remaining, or moving to another European country. However, regardless of the career choice made, the participants faced both career benefits and challenges.

Agency to repatriation

One of the initial concepts that emerged was the importance of familial relationships related to the Confucianism, compared to the attachment to the host country. Many participants viewed the return to their home country as a long-term plan, primarily driven by their strong family ties. Ten participants acknowledged that, despite having severed social contacts in China and needing to repair professional relationships, they had strong relationships with family members there. F13 expressed a strong desire to return to China, stating: *“My heart will always be with my parents.”* Consequently, family duties emerged as a significant topic, linking participants to their country of origin:

“My parents are the most central element of my life. I have been away from my parents for more than four years, and I feel terrible about being so far away. But I had to leave to work on the other side of the globe.” (F13)

One noticeable concern among female participants was starting a family, which reflects the norms in China and reveals an intriguing common thread. As in the West, the age of marriage and first births is increasing: in China, the average is around 29 (United Nations, 2013). However, the pressure to marry and have children is outstanding and a single woman over 30 is considered “an old maid” and unlikely to find a companion. She feels the pressure to get married, as there is high expectation for women to do so in China. Several times in her social media posts, she reflected on her in-betweenness by mentioning the dilemma of whether to return or stay, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. F1 explains a similar situation:

“I am over thirty years old and have been in a relationship with my boyfriend in Hungary for more than two years; my family desires that we return to China.” (F1)

While it is impossible to draw conclusions from all female SIEs’ concerns about starting a family, the results indicate a consistent pattern about the expectations of women to focus on marriage and potential childbearing, instead of pursuing a career, especially in a foreign country.

However, some dilemmas in Chinese SIEs’ repatriation exist. Firstly, international graduates’ career mobility encourages them to stay in the host country or relocate to other countries after graduation. Some of the Chinese SIEs interviewed recognised their socio-cultural status and limited financial resources, which restricted their ability to stay in the host country, which echoed Farivar et al.’s (2019) findings. M12 indicated:

“As you know, I am from a rural part of China and come from a low-to-middle-income family. My father, in particular, was unable to work due to physical limitations, and my mother was the sole provider for the family. Despite my desire to remain abroad, at least in Hungary, where I may transform my socio-cultural capital, I must choose to return to China with my family and support them.” (M12)

The first author had already interviewed M12 about international education and was well aware of his predicament and dilemma. M12 aspired to work for a non-profit organisation that promotes Chinese culture globally. Nevertheless, his plans were hindered as he had to return to his hometown.

Secondly, participants regarded studying or working “abroad” as preferable to studying in China, since a foreign degree could potentially provide them with a stable career in the ever-growing competitive Chinese labour market. In the wake of the COVID-19 restrictions, China has observed a rise in the number of highly qualified Western employees, who have returned to China. This has resulted in the devaluation of foreign degrees. F5 specifically expressed:

“Ironically, the present labour market has declined. When I arrived at a university in Hungary six years ago, I believed that many overseas students of my age would have found greater employment opportunities than their Chinese counterparts. However, many individuals, like myself, could not find acceptable employment following graduation.” (F5)

After completing a master’s degree, F5 faced a nine-month job search in the Chinese labour market. During this time, she remained in Hungary without financial support, which caused significant psychological stress. The first author maintained frequent contact with F5 on social media and noticed several posts indicating that she was on the verge of an emotional breakdown, expressing doubts about her skills, expertise and international experience.

Qualifications from lesser-known Hungarian universities are frequently subject to doubt. After the COVID-19 pandemic, many SIEs returned to China, and seven participants revealed that they lacked career advantages compared to local graduates and Western-educated professionals, even reporting lower career capital (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). Two respondents (M3 and M8) noted that a Hungarian degree does not guarantee a decent job, since they faced difficulties during online job interviews:

“The interviewer distrusts my credentials and skills since I am not a graduate of a top institution; I cannot tolerate this because of the common misconception that individuals from Anglo-nations are superior to non-Anglo countries.” (M3)

Several interviewees also questioned the value of skills and knowledge gained while they studied abroad.

Agency to remain

Social network was developed through various social events and participation in study groups. Additionally, many networks were formed through non-work-related events. The individuals who had previous experience with expatriation had realised it was crucial to proactively establish social networks. Thus, SIEs need to develop simultaneous membership with local groups, as evidenced by F1 who developed social networks via participation in cultural organisations and activities:

"I discuss progress with friends and may also learn from my peers. For instance, I joined the 9th district community last year to get acquainted with the local culture. On the one hand, the community is in desperate need of foreign assistance; on the other hand, it provides me with an opportunity for engagement." (F1)

F2 honestly described the whole psychological transition from estrangement to adaptation to the local culture:

"In the early stages of my time in Hungary, I had little contact with my local Hungarian colleagues. However, I gradually observed some changes in myself after being repeatedly invited to their homes and meeting their parents. Closer friendships with Hungarian colleagues marked a new era and way of life for me here." (F2)

The SIEs who spoke Hungarian were inclined to stay in Hungary due to their language proficiency, which can serve as the foundation for accumulating social capital, and ultimately developing career capital in their career paths. M10 explained that his socialisation in Hungary involves going out with locals and noted Hungarian drinking culture shapes their social lives. He described his friendships and collegiality with peers who speak Hungarian and talked extensively about them and his active involvement in cultural and community activities.

The SIEs aimed to become proficient speakers of Hungarian by taking advantage of Hungarian lifestyle gradually. Some interviewees, who had already spent considerable time in Hungary, chose to stay and secure a job. They based their decisions on recent experiences and, most importantly, virtual networks connected to work and friendship. M22 reported that he enjoyed the company of his colleagues, both formally and informally. Meanwhile, the first author's research diary indicated that M22 viewed their happiness as a reflection of his social capital, as evidenced by his social media posts.

The respondents showed a strong desire to escape the competitive work environment in China and achieve psychological satisfaction in Hungary. Many of the Chinese SIEs acknowledged that they had heavy workloads and high levels of peer pressure while working in China. In contrast, staying in Hungary made F21 aware of the possibility of being temporarily free from such constraints and she appreciated the sense of relaxation and psychological well-being, rather than focusing on competition:

"I could feel my heart calming down as I stepped away from China's competitive environment. After years of involvement in Hungarian work and life, I have gained a new perspective on the world, and my heart is becoming more peaceful." (M12)

The work visa programme is a public policy initiative that provides opportunities for individuals to work and live in other European countries. Six respondents decided to wait nine months to search for employment options in Hungary, after not being hired immediately after graduation. This strategy may motivate them to remain in Hungary during the early stages of their employment search. However, twelve interviewees without Hungarian language skills stated their fears about "fitting into" the Hungarian job market as their primary concern because of language barriers.

Agency to mobility

The positive impact of international experiences on career success has been documented in literature (Kraimer et al., 2009; Suutari et al., 2018). However, self-initiated expatriation is a transitional process, and individual factors, such as self-efficacy, can moderate one's interest in pursuing such experiences (Bozionelos et al., 2015). SIEs cannot rely on organisational help after their expatriation, so they must take the initiative to explore the multicultural context. As a result, early career SIEs may choose to relocate to another country.

The early career SIEs regarded their mobility as gaining transitional experiences. Cultural exposure, travel, and a desire for adventure were major motivators. The consideration of non-work-related support for SIEs is also important for human resource management (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010). It is well-established that younger individuals have more international mobility because they have fewer family responsibilities (Shaffer et al., 2012). As a result, age-associated perceived duties and responsibilities have emerged. The majority of male respondents (M12, M20) indicated that the optimal period for self-initiated expatriation is age-dependent:

"I was young and single, and I could choose the life I wanted, so I moved to Germany after graduating from Hungary, and you know what, I do not believe I would have made the same choice if I had a family." (M12)

"I am still young, so challenging myself is a wonderful experience." (M20)

Respondents regarded mobility to another European country as a means of speeding up their career development. After conducting a strategic analysis of employment opportunities in their respective fields, many individuals with strong credentials identify Germany and Northern Europe as desirable destinations. Obtaining education or work experience in Hungary is a logical springboard

to access more job opportunities and social resources. F1, who completed an internship during her studies in Hungary, is getting ready to move to Denmark, where she sees an opportunity for an enhanced career trajectory and a new life. This move has also led her to settle down in Denmark with her boyfriend.

Career success is not just the result of one big breakthrough, but rather a series of incremental steps and opportunities that build upon one another. F21, a PhD candidate, has spent over a decade studying in Europe. She recently shared vacation pictures with her boyfriend, acknowledging the benefits of exploring new cultures, even at the age of 33. In addition, she emphasized the importance of not only obtaining a doctorate, but also having the opportunity to work with a well-known academic supervisor. She expects this collaboration to serve as a springboard for her academic career in the long run.

Other important drivers included seeking adventure, and immersing themselves in a global culture, so as to gain a cosmopolitan identity. For early-career SIEs, this means pursuing novelty and innovation, and it appears that youth enhanced serendipity, whereby opportunities and adventures arise unexpectedly. By venturing beyond their comfort zones and connecting with a different culture, M3 and F21 regarded change as an opportunity to expand their knowledge and abilities:

"I have a worldwide perspective on international affairs. For instance, I rarely thought about migrants and ethnicity. They are naturally integrated into the international affairs that are currently on my mind." (M3)

"Compared to my former friends in China, I currently have a global consciousness. I am brave enough to travel to another European country for work and enrich my skills." (F21)

However, the participants who made the decision to relocate due to their career goals may still face dilemmas. Graduates often perceive themselves as more employable than they actually are, leading to information asymmetries between them and employers in the job market (William et al., 2018). Therefore, they need to navigate the system, understand the language, and get access to information in order to succeed in the professional communities. M10, who had a Hungarian-speaking internship and had assimilated to Hungarian culture as a consequence of living in Hungary, was confronted with the decision of moving to another European country.

"If I travel to another European country, I may only use Hungarian sometimes in the future." (M10)

Despite announcing his intention to move to Germany on social media over a year ago, M10 has yet to settle on a new destination within the EU. F13 elaborated upon the same dilemma, stating that she would not be able to use the Hungarian language elsewhere.

Because of the loss of socio-cultural capital, the U-curve model in cross-cultural psychology, which describes the stages of cultural adjustment, typically characterised by initial excitement, followed by disillusionment, and eventual adaptation, does not fully apply to early-career SIEs and their adjustment process occurred over a shorter period of time, with many cycles of honeymoon phases (Pereira et al., 2016). Chinese SIEs must adjust to a new environment from scratch. When early-career SIEs conduct overseas activities, their expatriate cultural adaptation is the most important element in determining their success. F1 admits that she will need time to adjust to her new surroundings and begin a new life with her boyfriend.

"As you know, I adore the lifestyle in Denmark; after having an internship here, I discussed our future plans with my boyfriend, and we decided to go to Denmark to make a living. However, because we have no relationships with anybody in Denmark, we must restart our life." (F1)

The findings show that Chinese early-career SIEs in Hungary benefit from their career trajectories, but the process is unpredictable and complex. Many Chinese SIEs faced a tripartite dilemma of repatriation, remaining and moving to a Western European country, none of which is free of certain downsides. Therefore, solving this dilemma requires great self-direction, interest in internationalisation and flexibility.

Discussion

All participants admitted the value of higher education to their personal development, future career and life aspirations, and they acknowledged their cultural, social (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and career capital development (Kanstrén & Suutari, 2021). However, many participants demonstrated a feeling of *in-betweenness* (Li & Primecz, 2021) and still faced career ambiguity when they were in the transitional period. Navigating the dilemma of repatriation, remaining or mobility requires a careful consideration of the linguistic, cultural, and professional factors (Al Ariss, 2012; Jonbekova et al., 2021) that shape Chinese early-career SIEs' personal and professional lives.

The decision whether to repatriate or remain is heavily influenced by relational factors, particularly family concerns. In contrast to earlier Western studies that suggest expatriates develop a multiple identity through mobility, this study found that Chinese early-career SIEs have a strong desire to maintain their cultural identities. A key value of filial piety related to Confucianism (Kohonen, 2005), substantially influences their career drive. The unique feature of enduring social bonds and relationships of Chinese culture led some early-career SIEs to view their academic knowledge, cultural experience, and social networks as valuable assets they could contribute to their current employment in China. At the same time, when Hungary having a relatively small employment market

and limited potential for career enhancement, it often lost its attraction for young Chinese professionals, despite its location within the EU.

Some the Chinese SIEs interviewed in this study regarded mobility as a potential springboard for career advancement, many of them faced limitations when working in other European countries, which ultimately led them to consider returning home, despite their initial desire for mobility. This refutes the dominance of two-step migration pathway (Hawthorne, 2010) among Chinese graduates in Hungary, which was observable in Anglo-Saxon and several Western countries. This can be explained by the unique cultural and linguistic context of Hungary, because only those research participants could secure potentially good employment in Hungary, who studied in Hungarian, because they could utilize their unique skills which might not be valued elsewhere in the world. Additionally, they may have developed a unique network in their host country. English-speaking SIEs or adventure-seeking individuals, who are interested in navigating diverse global contexts, may be less motivated to remain in Hungary where they may only be able to fulfil their career aspirations partially.

Conclusion

This context-rich empirical investigation provides evidence that Chinese early-career SIEs rarely follow the two-step migration pathway (Hawthorne, 2010) identified in Anglo-Saxon countries such as Australia and observed in several other Western contexts. Eventually, only a small proportion of young professionals remain in Hungary after graduation, mainly those who studied in Hungarian and whose unique language skills could not be utilized in other contexts. Another group of Chinese early-career SIEs sought employment in other European countries with limited success, and their Hungarian education was rarely fully recognized in these new countries. Repatriation was a logical option for many, even though their education in Hungary seemed a way out from their low socio-economic status. However, this exact social background later hindered them from finding education and employment in Anglo-Saxon or in other Western countries.

In addressing the dilemma faced by Chinese graduates, including early-career SIEs, some recommendations emerge. Firstly, organisations and policymakers in Hungary should recognize and provide support for the unique challenges associated with the transitional period experienced by the Chinese individuals, including proactive measures on the linguistic, cultural, and professional supports, especially in industries with labour shortage. Additionally, recognising the influence of language proficiency, strategies can be developed to retain Hungarian-speaking graduates by emphasizing the value of their unique skills and networks, while simultaneously providing opportunities for English-speaking SIEs to navigate diverse global contexts within Hungary.

This study provides practical advice for enhancing our knowledge of the professional problems and decisions

encountered by early-career SIEs. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study did not explore the resiliency tactics used by the respondents when confronted with these challenges. Therefore, future research could examine such techniques from individual and community perspectives. Secondly, due to the exploratory character of the study, the sample size was limited and cannot conclusively indicate whether the respondents' experiences are representative of Chinese early-career SIEs in other cultural contexts. Therefore, future research is needed to further explore this topic. Thirdly, further exploration is required to delineate the distinctions between resiliency tactics and coping mechanisms across various choices. Additional demographic characteristics, such as education level and age, could potentially influence the perceived career paths of SIEs and may warrant further investigation in future studies. Lastly, the social and cultural capital accumulated by early-career SIEs may not easily transfer to employment and, therefore, the difference between early career SIEs and professional employees is crucial and requires further exploration.

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