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Developing Career Capital Through International Assignments in Chinese MNCs: An Examination of Gender Impact on Career Capital

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Abstract

As globalization intensifies, understanding how expatriates enhance their professional trajectories becomes increasingly vital. However, most relevant studies are conducted in Western developed contexts, neglecting the effects on individuals from emerging countries like China. Within the unique context of Chinese multinational corporations (MNCs), this research report examines the accumulation of career capital among expatriates through international assignments, with a particular focus on gender differences. Employing an interpretive paradigm, the research utilizes qualitative methodology, specifically semi-structured interviews, to gather in-depth insights. Using De Fillippi & Arthur's career capital framework: "knowing-how", "knowing-whom", and "knowing-why" to analyse the data, the key findings reveal that both male and female expatriates experience substantial personal and professional growth; however, their approaches differ. Male expatriates are driven by their motivation and purpose to enhance work skills and develop networks. They typically receive support from their organization. Female expatriates leverage their networks to navigate challenges and enhance their visibility within the organization. Despite facing gender biases that may impede career advancement, they can receive support from mentors. It contributes to the International Human Resource Management (IHRM) literature and offers practical implications for MNCs aiming to foster inclusive environments for expatriates. Implications are rehearsed, exposing areas for further research.

Keywords

Career capital; International assignment; Gendered lens; Multinational corporation expatriates

1. Introduction

The global expansion of companies is becoming more prevalent, consequently, multinational corporations are increasingly deploying international assignments and relying on expatriates to effectively manage their global operations (Mello et al., 2023). International assignments are considered a key method for cultivating global leaders (Kohonen, 2005), these assignments provide several benefits, including the exchange of knowledge, skills, and experiences between headquarters and subsidiaries (Mello et al., 2023). Many individuals actively seek international assignments in order to build their career capital in a global context (Oleskeviciut et al., 2022). These individuals are called assigned expatriates who are not citizens of the host country but are legally sent abroad by their organizations for international assignments (Dickmann et al., 2018). They often accept international assignments to augment their

career capital by fostering the development of competencies, enhancing self-understanding, expanding social networks, and boosting motivation (Dickmann & Cerdin, 2018).

Although international work opportunities are crucial for advancing individuals' careers, men have historically been the primary participants in international assignments (Mercer, 2021). Scholars have long been concerned about women in international assignments, especially in terms of the prejudices they face. Ever since Adler's groundbreaking paper on female underrepresentation in international careers (Adler, 1984), such as prejudices against female expatriates in host countries and the exclusion of women in foreign cultures, are common challenges (Hutchings et al., 2013). The cultural gap between host and home countries can result in female expatriates facing discrimination, prompting organizations to choose men over women for international assignments (Hutchings et al., 2013). In part because of this discrimination, women are less willing to accept international assignments (Adler & Gundersen, 2001). This requires proactive management of gender diversity within MNCs, specifically human resource practices focused on enhancing gender equality in the workplace (Martins & Parsons, 2007). Although there have been some initial efforts to study female expatriates in previous research, the topic remains largely unexplored (Kraimer et al., 2016). Because of this lack of exploration, valid female leadership models are absent (Linehan, 2019), as are female voices. Regardless, research does suggest that female expatriates face greater challenges (Bader et al., 2023).

Increasingly, Chinese MNCs are recognizing the value of international assignments, and are frequently sending their employees to global locations (Jie et al., 2020). Despite limited research being conducted on expatriates within Chinese MNCs, there is some indication that Chinese companies often depend significantly on expatriates for both managerial and non-managerial roles across various industries (Smith & Zheng, 2016). As well as limited empirical research focusing on the gender performance of Chinese overseas enterprises (Liang, 2019). Due to the significance of this issue and the necessity for gender equality in international business settings (Bader et al., 2023), it is imperative to address this gap in the existing literature. It is noted that the management of expatriates in Chinese MNCs has been insufficient to date.

This study integrates the theory of career capital with a gendered lens to provide a preliminary understanding of how gender impacts the development of career capital through overseas assignments. It could test the applicability of Western concepts in different contexts, potentially contributing to the IHRM literature, thus emphasizing the necessity for further research on successful expatriation. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on gender-specific expatriate success and amplifies the perspectives of an understudied population.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Career Capital and International Assignments

The concept of career capital refers to the resources embedded within individuals and their relationships that may lead to career success (De Fillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). The higher the chance of achieving success in the current world of career fields (Guan et al., 2019). An international assignment refers to the overseas task under taken for MNCs (Reiche & Harzing, 2010). The career capital represents individuals' career investments through various "ways of knowing", which comprise the career capital framework. there are "three ways of knowing": "Knowing-how", "Knowing-whom", and "Knowing-why" (De Fillippi & Arthur, 1994).

"Knowing-How" is the human and cultural capital that equips individuals with the necessary skills, knowledge, and understanding for successful performance in work. This capability consists of explicit knowledge, implicit experiences, soft skills, and technical expertise (De Fillippi & Arthur, 1994). Early studies among expatriates argued that comprehensive operational knowledge of global business (Carpenter et al., 2001; Tung, 1998), specific international technical skills (Fink et al., 2005), foreign language (Harzing et al., 2011), and management skills (Antal, 2000) are very practical skills likely to be developed while abroad working, and these skills possess adaptability and transferability across diverse cultural contexts, functional domains, and organizational boundaries (Cappellen & Janssens, 2008). The change in the working environment enhances individuals' cognitive ability (Jokinen et al., 2008). Cross-cultural work can enhance the ability to work in a multicultural context (Jokinen, 2010), and the skill to effectively communicate with individuals from various cultural backgrounds (Jokinen et al., 2008; Mello et al., 2023). It also improves the understanding of people, especially the understanding of different people's behaviours and needs (Dickmann & Doherty, 2008; Jokinen et al., 2008). International assignments are an opportunity to learn about

organizational strategies and internationalization management systems (Dickmann & Cerdin, 2018), and expatriates seek to gain an insight into the business market, engage in self-reflection on their skills and knowledge, and enhance their competency in career progress (Mello et al., 2023). Moreover, they enhance foreign industry and market knowledge (Yakob, 2020).

"Knowing-Whom" is seen as social capital and refers to the value of relationships and reputations in both personal and professional lives, made up of intra-firm, inter-firm, professional, and social relations combined in a network (De Fillippi & Arthur, 1994). Through international assignments, individuals greatly expand their networks and social connections on a global scale, something that is not achievable through domestic work (Bozkurt & Mohr, 2011; Mäkelä, 2007). Research has suggested that expatriates can build inter-organizational networks and teams across boundaries during international assignments (Jokinen et al., 2008) and maintain the external network at the same time (Dickmann & Cerdin, 2018). Although many expatriates have finished international assignments a long time ago, their experiences of building social networks abroad remain valuable (Ellis, 2015).

"Knowing-Why" refers to the motivation and personal significance that provide individuals with drive, purpose, and a sense of identification in their work; it relates to issues of motivation and personal meaning (Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007). Expatriates enhance their knowing-why career capital through international assignments by facing new challenges and consistently putting their career growth in jeopardy due to the unpredictable nature of global careers, undertaking activities to enhance self-skills and competencies (Jokinen et al., 2008). This capital is related to self-awareness, career understanding, and purpose; personality traits like proactive behaviours and openness to new experiences; and actions linked to exploring career options (Hirschi, 2012).

Overall, the current literature on career capital confirms the impact of international assignments and changes in expatriates' career capital, but these studies did not explore career capital accumulation from the perspective of gender. Moreover, most studies focus on Western expatriates, limited knowledge exists in the context of China.

2.2 Career Capital with a Gendered Lens

Career capital has been classified by scales in many studies, including (Jokinen et al., 2008). Dickmann and Cerdin (2018) used this scale and indicated it is validated for expatriates' research. This section uses the scales of "three ways of knowing" to organize a review of the advantages and obstacles encountered by females (Table 1).

Existing literature shows that compared to men, women in various fields encounter more obstacles when expatriating, however, there is no notable disparity in the effectiveness of work adjustment, performance, commitment, and job satisfaction between female expatriates and their male counterparts (Bastida, 2018). The challenges faced by female expatriates include feeling discriminated against in the host country, struggling to balance work and family life, as well as encountering more obstacles than men at every step of the expatriate journey (Hutchings & Michailova, 2014).

Knowing-how, women are communicative and expressive (Ross-Smith & Huppatz, 2010), but may face difficulties in adjusting to the multicultural work setting with low female participation (Culpan & Wright, 2002). On operational skills, women can acquire certain knowledge and skills just like men (Huppatz & Goodwin, 2013). Women excel in organizational skills, while men are often recognized for their confidence and persuasive abilities (O'Dwyer & Richards, 2021). However, female expatriates face more challenges than their male counterparts in accumulating career capital in management and leadership, as research indicated that management and leadership are often seen as professions dominated by men, creating a masculine environment that presents numerous challenges for women looking to advance in their careers (Booysen & Nkomo, 2010; Bullough et al., 2017). In the view of "People knowledge", research has shown that female expatriates showed a higher level of comfort and active interaction with people (Vance & McNulty, 2014). Work adjustment relies on interpersonal relationships (Black & Stephens, 1989). Female expatriates exhibit higher levels of work adjustment compared to male expatriates (Selmer & Leung, 2003), and women are more considerate of the needs of others (Huppatz & Ross-Smith, 2010).

Knowing whom, social capital is crucial for women to advance to senior management positions (Metz & Tharenou, 2001). The literature emphasizes a significant concern that women face obstacles in their pursuit of career advancement due to limited access to relevant social capital and networks (Timberlake, 2005). The research suggests that gender plays a significant role in the accumulation of social capital, leading to men perceiving women as less valuable network members compared to their men colleagues (Palgi & Moore, 2004). Moreover, ingrained masculine

organizational cultures and a tendency to associate with similar individuals create obstacles for women to access critical networks (Alan, 2017; Thornton, 2019). Women's inclination is towards relationship building, but they are often excluded from influential networks (McAdam et al., 2019). Therefore, the achievement of strong and long-lasting networks is more difficult for women, or they may be excluded from entry into more powerful (male) networks.

Table 1. Career capital comparison by gender using scales (Jokinen et al., 2008)

	Scales	Definition	Result of literature review
Knowing-how	*Cognitive competence*	The skill to distinguish the most important work and the ability to swiftly shift work focus	Unclear
	Culture knowledge	The skill to effectively communicate with individuals in a cross-culture environment	Positive for Female
		Understanding in multicultural settings.	Negative for Female
	Operational skills	Management skills, international knowledge	Negative for Female
	Organization knowledge	Understanding the strategic roles of different units in the international organization, Knowledge of international management systems, and competitive advantage	Negative for Female
	Business knowledge	Understanding financial options, shareholders' interests, and the global market	Unclear
	People knowledge	Knowing the common factors that shape human behaviours.	Positive for Female
		Understanding the factors that diversify the needs of individuals.	
Knowing-whom	*Social networks*	Ability to link resources and activities internationally	Negative for Female
		Ability to build inter-organizational networks and teams across boundaries	Negative for Female
		Ability to build and maintain the external network	Positive for Female
	Relationships	Knowledge of people with influential power within organizations to access important information and receive emotional support.	Negative for Female
Knowing-why	*Knowing self*	Able to recognize self-strengths and weaknesses, needs and motives; be confident; understand what other people think about me;	Negative for Female
	Personal development	Setting goals for personal development;	Negative for Female
		Undertaking activities to enhance self-skills and competencies	Unclear
		Knowing more than is required for task accomplishment	Unclear

Knowing-why, research found women tend to rate their own performance lower than men, even though there is no significant difference in job performance between men and women when evaluated by a third party (Connerley et al., 2008; Sinangil & Ones, 2003). This indicates that there is a self-imposed barrier for women when it comes to international assignments (Fischlmayr, 2002). For "personal development", women in dual-career couples appear to prioritize family matters more, and neglect their own career development (Dupuis et al., 2008). Motivation is influenced by emotions, and the emotions exhibited by effective managers align with those traditionally associated with men rather than women (Fischbach et al., 2015). Similarly, other research has shown that participants believe that female leaders' career motivations are influenced by emotions, leading to the perception that women are less suitable for higher positions compared to men (Brescoll, 2016).

2.3 Research Gaps and Research Question

China frequently experiences gender discrimination (Fincher, 2013; Steinfeld, 2014; Zhang et al., 2021). This discrimination can be on salary with numerous studies consistently finding a substantial and notable disparity in earnings between male and female workers in China (Chi & Li, 2014); hiring discrimination (Zhang et al., 2021); inequality impedes professional growth (Aiyu et al., 2015; Qing, 2017, 2020); and host-country nationals' prejudice against women expatriates' performance in international assignments (Zhong et al., 2015). There is, however, limited research on the effect of gender on the career capital of Chinese expatriates. As time goes by, women's capabilities should be given more attention.

The current literature on career capital confirms the impact of international assignments on expatriates' career capital development. However, limited research is available regarding the ways in which women navigate discrimination and obstacles to enhance their career capital. Recent literature has emphasized the need for more research on how gender characteristics impact sustainable career development (Wicht et al., 2022). Leaders also need a deeper understanding of how gender affects careers, as their involvement is crucial in the organizational context (Straub et al., 2020). The existing studies on this topic are limited, and most of this research is in the context of Western countries. In China, there continues to be a significant under-representation of women in senior positions (Chun et al., 2024), and limited research on the specific characteristics of career capital development for women in international assignments. This paper is a tentative exploration of this research gap, it is different from the previous studies on women's career development, which focus solely on women, as an empirically grounded investigation examines how female expatriates accumulate career capital in knowing-how, knowing-whom, and knowing-why, compared to their male counterparts. The research question is focused on:

> How do male and female expatriates develop career capital through international assignments within Chinese MNCs to advance their professional growth?

3. Methodology

3.1 Method Overview

Interpretivism is adopted as the paradigm as it enables a comprehensive exploration of life experiences in the real world (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This research report employed a qualitative method, since it is appropriate for revealing the interpretation of empirical data and the emergence of themes and unique descriptions (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020). Through a qualitative method, this study uses semi-structured interviews to collect participants' stories about their expatriate experiences. Semi-structured interviews have the advantages of both structured and unstructured interviews, and aim to maintain a balance between focus and flexibility, by facilitating the construction of an individualized narrative (Cochran, 1990).

3.2 Participants

This report utilized convenience sampling followed by snowball sampling. A total of 40 expatriates (N = 40) were located (Table 2), six males and eight females. Participants met the following criteria:

(1) They have lived and worked in another country as an expatriate.
(2) They got a promotion to the managerial position after their international assignments, i.e., will have subordinates within the line of work.
(3) They are currently working in China.

Table 2. Interview sample demographics

Sample Demographics	Male	Female	Total	Percent% (Male)	Percent% (Male)
Number of interviews	18	22	40	45%	55%
Age average	40	38	39		
Marital status					
Have Children	18	18	36	100%	82%

Table 2 Continued

In relationship or married	18	6	24	100%	27%
Single or divorced	0	16	16	0%	73%
IA destination					
Europe	6	6	12	33%	27%
USA	8	12	20	45%	55%
Vietnam	4	4	8	22%	18%
Length of IA (months)					
Average; SD [Min., Max.]	6-24	6-24	6-24		
Previous IA experience					
Yes	8	5	13	44%	23%
No	10	17	27	56%	77%
Job position					
Human resource	3	8	11	17%	36%
Finance	0	4	4	0%	18%
Management Marketing	6	1	7	33%	5%
Supply Chain	2	6	8	11%	27%
Project management	2	2	4	11%	10%
Technology	5	1	6	28%	4%

3.3 Data Collection

The empirical data was obtained through both face-to-face and online interviews, which is valuable in helping us address complex problems (Guercini, 2014). The interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded in audio format, with durations ranging from 30 to 60 minutes. The recorded interviews were transcribed using translation software (RecordPro) and then meticulously translated into English by the author.

3.4 Data Analyses

This study follows a modified version of the thematic theory analysis process, which includes six steps: selection of quotations, selection of keywords from quotations, coding based on keywords, developing new themes via codes, interpretation, and developing a new model (Naeem et al., 2023) (Figure 1).

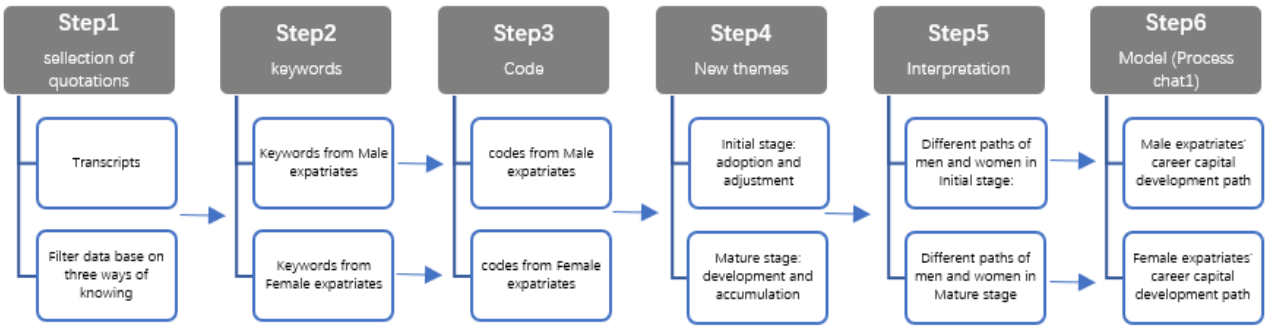

Figure 1. Analysis process.

4. Findings

Research findings are presented in three sections following "three ways of knowing". Major themes are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. New Themes

Career capital	Themes	
	Male	Female
Knowing-how	Focus on the most important work	Sharing and learning skills in the host organization
	Show performance (value) related to their job	Extensive accumulation of vocational skills
	Sense of cross-culture	Recognize the significance of support
	Knowledge of global company culture	Local-culture knowledge
	Competitive technical skills & global marketing knowledge	Knowledge of factors shapes people's behaviour
	Understanding the management systems of the organization	Understanding the needs of individuals
	Company strategic knowledge	
Knowing-whom	Large group network	Recognized disadvantage in social network
	Keeping relationships even if not insufficient	Setting value exchange
	Combine the network in China and the host country	Recognized rare relationships with the top leadership team
	External network resource	Building a small group social network
	Build relationships with leadership	Having a career mentor
Knowing-why	Ambition and motivation enhance expertise	Being more self-confident
	Understanding self-strengths and weaknesses	Understand how other people think about me
	Clearer about career plans	Clear career direction

4.1 Knowing-how

4.1.1 Cognitive competence

From a cognitive competence standpoint, female expatriates differ from their male counterparts in that they are adept at managing multiple tasks at the same time. While men tend to focus on the most critical task at hand, women demonstrate strong work adjustment skills that enable them to quickly shift their focus and concentration to various targets. Men acquired the skill to discern the most important information. Although the female expatriates did not identify and focus on the most important work during the international assignment, they obviously had the ability to switch jobs more quickly.

> *The overseas assignment was task-based, after several leadership meetings in the host country, I realized and the most important thing is following up milestone and completing it in accordance with existing quality standards. This is what organizations are most concerned about ….(Male, project management, Vietnam)*
> *I have a degree in Italian, language is my strength … While working internationally, I was often invited to participate in meetings with other expatriates and translated from Italian for them when they could not explain their work clearly in English. This took up some of my work time but integrated into the project team in Italy. (Female, project management, Europe)*

4.1.2 Cultural knowledge

Although male and female expatriates view cultural knowledge differently when working in the host country, they all agree that cultural knowledge is important for further work. Women participants were more focused on how

personal cultural background differences could affect communication in the workplace. Male participants focused on the cultural differences between the two companies in China and in the host country.

> *I gained a deep understanding of and respect for diverse cultures. Additionally, I took the initiative to learn about local labour regulations. (Female, Project management, Europe)*
> *I was transferred to our Swiss headquarters to ensure effective recruitment aligned with the company's values. During my international assignment, I acquired knowledge about diverse cultures, legal structures, and corporate practices on a global scale…. I have a deep understanding of the corporate culture, which makes it possible for me to find more suitable employees. (Male, HR, Europe)*

4.1.3 Operational skills

Both male (*n*=18) and female (*n*=22) Chinese expatriates thought that working abroad could enhance their language skills. However, after their assignment, they found that while they noted some improvement, making significant qualitative changes was challenging. Female participants shared experiences demonstrating their eagerness to acquire new skills, such as international knowledge, management skills, and technology skills, and also skills not directly relevant to their current job.

> *I have not made much progress in language skills. There are too many minor languages here (in Switzerland), and I haven't spent much time on language, I prefer to take this opportunity to learn professional knowledge, for example, legal structures, and corporate practices on a global scale ……. Mainly in English communication…… (Male, HR, Europe)*
> *……While I don't have experience with design drawings before (in China), because it not related to my work. In Italy, I learned skills in looking at the design drawing. It has also helped me prepare for a future role in sales…. (Female, project, Europe)*

4.1.4 Organization knowledge and Business knowledge

Female participants reported that this kind of information about the company's strategy and management skills was difficult to digest into their career capital. Male participants with this knowledge behaved more actively.

> *This Italian company fosters an open-minded and efficient culture, encouraging employees to communicate directly with the top management team instead of going through their line managers. Being assigned to the international task provided me with the opportunity to participate in high-level management meetings, enabling me to understand the company's strategic direction and acquire valuable insights into management practices from senior executives. unfortunately, I am only a small potato, I did not know how to deal with this knowledge without company's supports. (Female, project, Europe)*
> *In order to effectively answer questions from management team with acceptable logical, I copied the work style of a very good director in the host office at that time. I copied the logic of his presentations and even the way he wrote emails. This approach not only helped me gain recognition, but also taught me the value of adjusting my work style to align with a company's procedures and leadership style when entering a new work environment. (Male, Management Marketing, The USA)*

4.1.5 People knowledge

Female employees are more sensitive to the behaviours of their colleagues and the factors that influence these coworkers' behaviours. In contrast, male participants did not mention similar experiences in their statements. They appear to be less thinking about the meanings behind other people's behaviours compared to their female coworkers. These male participants focused more on what are the results of other people's work for them.

> *…… During project meetings with the global team, I consistently take meeting minutes and share them with everyone. I noticed that my Italian colleagues appeared visibly more relaxed when they realized they would receive minutes after the meeting. Because they wander off sometimes in meetings or do other things. I didn't observe my colleagues that closely when I was working in China, perhaps because we were familiar with each other. I started paying attention to how these little things that may change my job…… (Female, project, Europe)*
> *I spent a lot of time on my job while working aboard, I rarely think about the meaning behind people's actions. I prefer to focus on what results their working attitude brings to me (Male, HR, Europe).*

4.2 Knowing-whom

4.2.1 Social networks

Based on empirical evidence, male and female expatriates exhibit different social styles. Men tend to gravitate towards forming connections within large groups, whereas women prefer engaging in social activities within smaller groups that they feel are better suited to them. On the whole, both male and female Chinese expatriates hold a positive view towards the acquisition of career capital based on "social networks" in international assignments.

> *I possess my own unique strengths and firmly believe that building lasting social connections involves a mutual exchange of value with other local colleagues. (Female, Finance, Europe)*
> *This is a good opportunity to get to know each other with overseas colleagues, which can make the work communication smoother……. I have many local friends (in host country), sometimes we consult each other on work-related issues after back to China, acting as each other's advisors. This level of social networking is insufficient to serve as career capital. (Male, Management Marketing, The USA)*

4.2.2 Relationships

Both genders concur that the knowledge of people with influential power within organizations is crucial to access important information and receive emotional support. Female participants described a social experience that was important to them, but this relationship is not easy to build, and it is difficult to connect to high-power social connections. The male participants also recognize the importance of building relationships with influential persons internal or external organizations.

> *I tried to link some powerful people on the social network, but as a junior female employee without high-profile connections, I can only find networking opportunities with colleagues in similar positions. (Female, supply chain management, Europe)*
> *I had the chance to present my work directly to the boss at the head office, although it was not very frequent, it was still the biggest opportunity during my overseas assignment. A little encouragement and some advice from him have had a beneficial influence on my work. (Male, Marketing, The USA)*

4.3 Knowing-why

4.3.1 Knowing-self

Chinese female expatriates became more confident. Their statements primarily revolve around personal growth and self-improvement. They understand their strengths and weaknesses from others. Male expatriates are aware of their value to the company, both good and bad. Accordingly, they understand their strengths and weaknesses by themselves.

> *My personality has experienced a major shift in Italy. I lack confidence due to my weight. In China, people rarely praise others, especially for someone like me who is overweight. The continual praise from my Italy coworkers has significantly increased my self-assurance. I have become more comfortable with wearing makeup. This newfound self-assurance has made me more confident when giving presentations. Now I am a confident salesperson. (Female, project management, Europe)*
> *We were required to submit monthly reports while on international assignment. During this time, I often assessed myself and understand my value through the sales I bring in. I understood my strengths and weaknesses via continuing assess my sales performance that impacted my career. (Male, Management Marketing, Europe)*

4.3.2 Personal development

Both male and female expatriates gained deeper insight into their careers, which pushed them to undertake activities to enhance their competencies.

> *I have recently gained a deeper insight into my career. Previously, I believed that as a salesperson, building a sociable personality is crucial for success. I have come to realize that in my industry, it is not only important to be sociable, but also to be knowledgeable and skilled in my field, so that I can fully develop my career (Male, Marketing, the USA)*
> *Due to financial constraints, salary is the reason why I became an accountant. The overseas assignment*

changed my understanding of my career direction. To pursue long-term development, I must do the career I love, which strengthened my belief in transferring to the logistics department……A six-month overseas assignment away from my family was one of the most relaxing times. All my time was devoted to work, and I had the confidence that I could make a difference. (Female, Finance, Europe)

The feedback "knowing-why" is positive. Women have a favourable self-assessment. Men's feedback has mainly centred around having a clearer vision of their personal career goals and maintaining a positive outlook on their career development abroad.

5. Discussion

This study yields two key findings. Firstly, there were significant differences in the experiences of male and female expatriates regarding the impact of international assignments on career capital. Secondly, we analysed these differences through a gendered lens to provide a comprehensive comparison with existing research.

5.1 Knowing-how

Cognitive competence: the results align with existing literature, which has also demonstrated women have a higher level of work adjustment skill compared to male expatriates (Selmer & Leung, 2003). Previous research indicated given the changing work environment where transitions are increasingly common, role transitions are becoming more diverse and complex (Chudzikowski, 2012; Mayrhofer & Iellatchitch, 2005). This reflects the different cognitive tendencies of men and women.

Cultural knowledge, female expatriates respect local culture and express strong communication and interpersonal skills with local colleagues who can act as cultural liaisons to interpret local behaviours in the context of cross-culture. This finding is consistent with an American expatriates study that female expatriates showed a higher level of comfort and active interaction with people (Vance & McNulty, 2014). Previous studies have indicated the effectiveness of this method, emphasizing the importance of successful interactions with locals in helping expatriates adjust to work and life in a foreign country (Andresen & Bergdolt, 2021). Chinese male expatriates are more inclined to adapt to the different culture and develop cultural knowledge by seeking support from both the organization in the host country and their home country, rather than relying on interaction with their colleagues. It is possible that this approach by Chinese male expatriates is influenced by a collectivist culture, which is more common in Eastern countries like China (Hofstede, 2001).

Discussing operational skills, organizational knowledge, and business knowledge as a group. Previous research said China is a masculine society in career achievement (Briscoe et al., 2012). Male expatriates are confident when engaging in conversations about acquiring operational skills, organizational knowledge, and business knowledge as valuable assets for their careers, leading them to naturally feel more qualified to take on leadership roles. They usually accumulate this career capital according to their job needs and behave more positively in understanding of organizational and business knowledge, such as management systems of the organization, strategic, competitive advantage, and global marketing. Although this study does not specifically examine male-dominated work environments, men found it easier to cultivate career capital in leadership skills, which is often associated with the prevailing global leadership stereotype of 'Think Manager, Think Male'. (Schein, 2007). Women reported greater enthusiasm for developing operational skills than their male counterparts. Younger women in junior and middle management positions have been shown to place high value on possessing practical skills and knowledge (Chen et al., 2012). The average age of females in our sample was 38; they are not junior. However, the findings showed that Chinese female expatriates are still hungry for more operational skills. These female participants commented that they did not want to enhance their knowledge of organization and business due to difficulties in converting and applying it in their home country. Female expatriates believed that the accumulation of operational skills are positive for their later success in career, aligning with existing research about gaining knowledge and skills being crucial for achieving success in careers (Gander, 2015; Haenggli & Hirschi, 2020) and crucial to an individual's regulation of identity (Stevens et al., 2006). The intentional development of female expatriates' technical skills to achieve favourable professional objectives goes unrecognized (Janssens et al., 2006).

Male expatriates are influenced by "Guanxi" in developing people's knowledge. They acknowledged that investing in the development of people's knowledge in the host country would not yield valuable returns upon their return to

China. This viewpoint is associated with “Guanxi”, which is defined as purposive network behaviours (Chang, 2011), and the core of “Guanxi” lies in the cultivation of long-term relationships (Gandolfi & Bekker, 2008), but not through an international assignment. Chinese female expatriates understand people's knowledge from another angle. They offer kind help or improve their own work style by observing others' behaviour at work. This action provides support for them to accumulate “knowing-whom”. For female expatriates, the accumulation of “knowing-how” promotes the accumulation of “knowing-whom”.

5.2 Knowing-whom

The results of developing knowing-whom do not align with the conclusions drawn from previous Western research. The prevailing belief in the literature is that gender plays a significant role in the accumulation of social capital (Palgi & Moore, 2004). As a result, women have diminished social capital (Eagly et al., 2007). This paper found that Chinese expatriates increased their social capital during international assignment; gender differences result in different ways of accumulating.

Male expatriates prefer to involve their home country’s line manager in the social network that they built in the host country, then form a large social network that combines coworkers both in the home country and the host country's organizations. It allows these male expatriates to build new social resources in the host country without too much weakening of their links to their native organizations. This way solves the challenge indicated by Mäkelä and Suutari (2009) as expatriates build their international social capital, their ties to their home country may weaken.

Although, the observation has been made that women tend to exhibit a higher degree of compassion and care, leading to a greater inclination towards cultivating relationships, nurturing others, and prioritizing interpersonal connections (Eagly & Koenig, 2006), in the findings here, female expatriates in this paper tend to form small social groups and took time to establish deeper relationships with one or two people. This is the same as seeking out a ‘mentor’. As previous research discovered, expatriate adjustment in the host country was made easier with the help of mentors (Zhuang et al., 2013). The mentors not only guided them through work and life, but also provided emotional support during the international assignment.

5.3 Knowing-why

Chinese female expatriates reported that they strengthened their self-confidence and self-awareness during the international assignment, also realising their own value and interest, as well as the belief in being a leader. This aligns with a previous study, which emphasized the significance of these aspects of “knowing-why” as essential meta-skills for women in their journey to becoming effective leaders (Stead & Elliott, 2013). Female expatriates build their confidence through conversations with others, as well as recognizing their strengths and weaknesses based on other colleagues’ evaluations. In other words, the accumulation of “knowing-how” promotes the development of “knowing-why”.

Male enhanced their sense of purpose on the assignment and further career targets. Their clarity about the goals makes them more aware of which career capital to develop with focus and be more motivated. This line of thought is consistent with previous Westen studies showing that “Knowing-why” drives expatriates to accumulate “knowing-how” and “knowing-whom” (Dickmann & Harris, 2005).

5.4 Practical implications

The research question was addressed, and two different paths of how the gender factor for international assignment can impact their career capital development are illustrated in Figure 2.

The process is divided into an initial stage and a mature stage. In the initial stage, expatriates try to adapt and adjust to the new environment in the host country. During this period, they tried to acquire some knowledge and skills but were unable to accumulate them as capital that would benefit their future careers. Chinese male expatriates typically begin their international assignments from “knowing-whom”, but the initial social behaviours only establish a big social network for them. The social capital accumulated at this stage is not valuable career capital. At this stage, the most important thing for male expatriates is to have a sense of purpose on assignment and their career and an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, referred to as “knowing-why”. There is also no accumulation of valuable “knowing-how” at this stage.

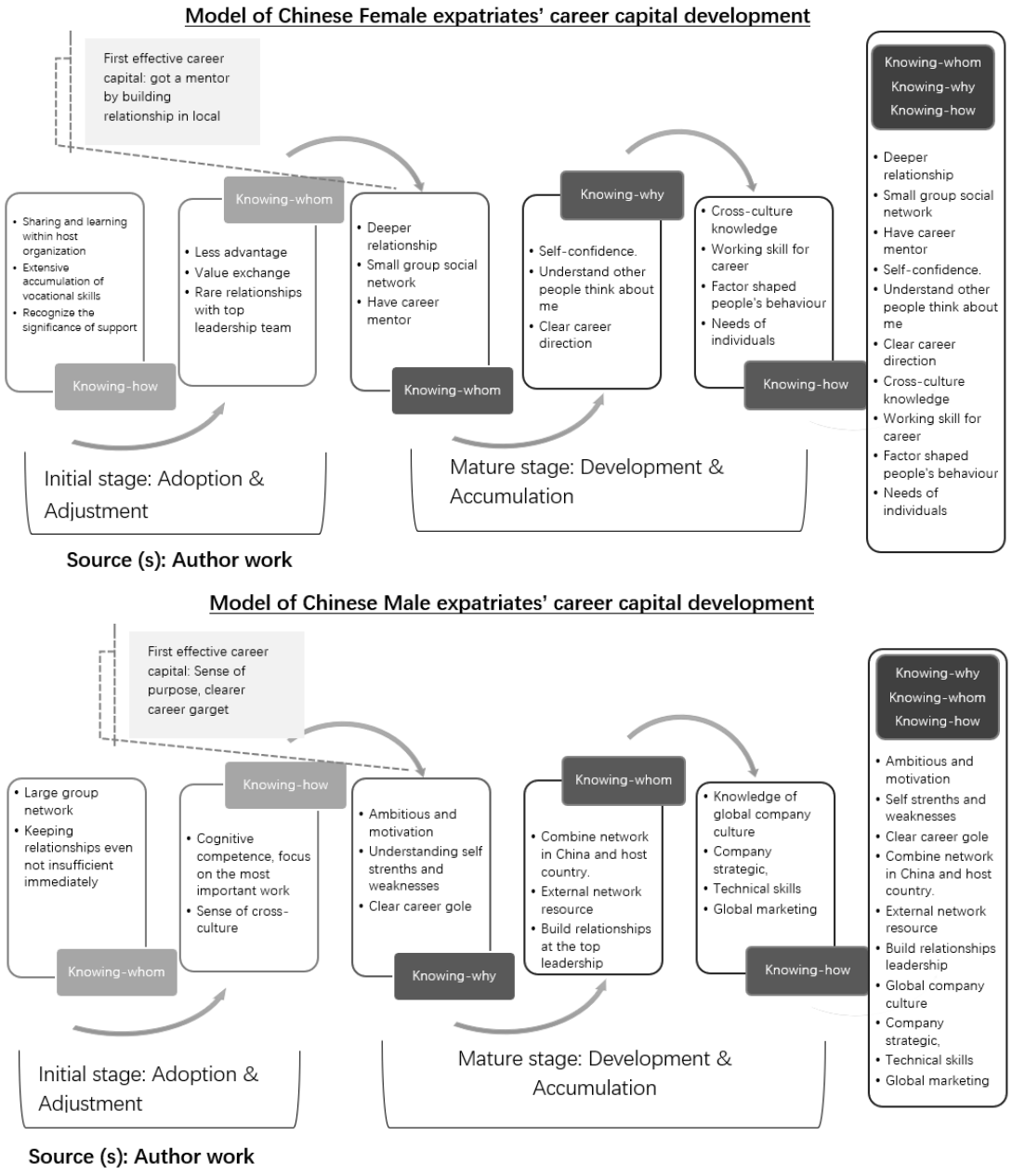

Figure 2. Models of male and female expatriates' career capital development.

In the initial stage, women enhance sharing and learning professional work skills with colleagues in the host office and try to show performance (value) related to operational skills. They desired to be recognized through the embodiment of personal professional values. Although this approach did not accumulate valuable "know-how" and even consumed working time, leading to the need for more overtime, in the process, they extended their knowledge of work skills. With this act of "knowing-how" accumulation, female expatriates built small social groups and found a mentor. The accumulation of knowing-how enables them to acquire effective "knowing-whom" career capital in the initial stage. Several female participants highlighted the role that a mentor had in the development of their career capital—in many ways, the emergence of a mentor was the catalyst for the development of career capital that came later.

In the mature stage, the relationship between an individual, their competencies, and the specific capacity context heavily influences the effectiveness of career capital development, transfer, and utilization. Both male and female

expatriates acquired valuable career capital of “knowing whom” and then enhanced their “knowing-how” career capital.

5.5 Limitations and future directions

The study is subject to certain limitations. First, the results are relevant to the Chinese MNCs context. Furthermore, the study design is not representative and does not differentiate between factors such as industry variations or the potential impact of interviewees' age on the results. While qualitative research offers in-depth insights, it may not provide statistically representative results. For future research, it is recommended that studies explore the intersectionality of gender with other identity factors, such as ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by expatriates in their career capital development.

6. Conclusion

This report provides a new insight for considering different approaches to harnessing the potential of male and female expatriates as valuable human resources (HR). By considering success as an action taken by expatriates rather than a natural personal characteristic, it presents new opportunities for men, and especially for women. It also presents a fresh view for International HR professionals. To address the research question, the new Model Developed:

- Initial Stage: Adoption and Adjustment: This phase focuses on how expatriates adapt to their new environments and begin to build their networks and skills.
- Mature Stage: Development and Accumulation: In this phase, expatriates actively leverage their experiences to enhance their career capital, with a clear distinction between male and female strategies.

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