

The Career Paths of Chinese MBA Graduates

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Introduction

Changes in the economic structure of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are transforming the work life of the Chinese people (Ding & Warner, 2001). Much of the scholarly literature about careers, most of which studied the concept of career within western industrial societies, declares that the traditional career model is becoming obsolete and a new career model is taking shape (Altman, 2000; Arnold & Jackson, 1997; Arthur, 1994). The traditional career model—a hierarchical model often associated with bureaucracies—asserts that organizations shape careers by confining them within specific boundaries that they set. The new career model—often described as boundaryless and protean—claims that individuals deliberately shape and direct their own career, transcending the boundaries set by organizations.

This paper explores whether career patterns of Chinese citizens who embark on a course of study leading to a graduate degree in business have changed accordingly, thus expanding the new concept of career beyond western industrialized nations.

Related Literature

Graduate Management Education in China

In 1978, Chinese politician and reformer Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) noted that lack of management education programs was a major obstacle to China's modernization (Lau & Roffey, 2002). Today, the popular business press expounds the tremendous growth of MBA programs in China. MBA programs there have proliferated at an unprecedented rate since the Chinese government first recognized and approved nine MBA programs in 1991 (Hulme, 2004; Steele, 2006). By 2006, there were at least 95 MBA programs operating in China (Steele, 2006). Likewise during the same period, the Graduate Management Admission

Council (GMAC) reported growth in the number of Chinese citizens taking the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)—a standardized exam used by admissions officials at more than 4,000 institutions worldwide (GMAC 1992; GMAC, 2006). Yet, even with the current proliferation, the supply of MBA graduates still does not meet the needs of organizations seeking highly qualified managers (Haight & Kwong, 2001; Lavelle, 2006; Rogers, 2004; Steele, 2006).

To meet that demand, according to the Shanghai Education commission, China needed to produce 37,500 MBAs a year by 2006 (China Daily, 2003). Nevertheless, in 2003 only 10,000 students were enrolled in MBA programs in China (Hulme, 2004). There, as in other areas of the world, “a higher education is one of the most important avenues for social mobility and promotion” (Xiaohao, 2004, p.40), but “the Communist Party has traditionally viewed higher education as a threat to political and social stability” (Walfish, 2001, p.A47). Even so, “the leadership there has recognized that China's economic modernization requires highly skilled workers” (Walfish, 2001, p.A47). In fact, Deng Xiaoping specified that China could benefit particularly from outside management education and expertise (Borgonjon & Vanhonacker, 1992). To alleviate the imbalance of supply and demand, the 11th Five Year Plan adopted by the National People's Congress promised better education through increased support for the development of the private education sector (China Daily, 2006). Consequently, there is enormous growth in the number of foreign educational institutions collaborating with local Chinese universities (Mooney, 2006).

GMAC reports an increased number of Chinese citizens wanting to study for the MBA in the United

States (Peyton, 2007). According to some, the “brain drain” among Chinese citizens, which is caused by individuals leaving their home country for education and employment opportunities abroad, has been steadily reversing course (Haiming, 2004; Powell, 2007; Zweig, 2006)—“of the 12 Chinese students who graduated from Harvard Business School with MBA degrees in 1999, six returned to work in China (Ding & Warner, 2001, p.330).” Adoption and integration of western-style management practices into the business culture of China seem inevitable (Bai & Enderwick, 2003; Haight & Kwong, 2001) given China’s attempt to decrease the gap between the supply and demand for trained managers through a concerted effort to increase foreign educational partnerships and entice foreign-educated citizens to return home.

China’s Economy and Career Opportunities

China has induced a slow, gradual transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-based economy (Hills & Fleisher, 1997; Lin et al., 1996). Considering this economic transformation taking shape, the introduction of western-style management practices may not be the only change occurring within China’s economy. Different types of career paths may also be making inroads into the Chinese workforce—particularly among educated individuals. Until the 1990s, governmental institutions assigned jobs to college graduates (Melvin, 2006). Today, “economic reforms [in China] have led to the introduction of employment policies which are similar to some extent to those of Western countries” (Branine, 1997, p.77).

Prior to the economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, the state controlled the means of production, distribution, consumption, and human resources (Bai & Enderwick, 2003; Branine, 1997). “The need for market-oriented management personnel was virtually non-existent in China’s centrally planned economy” (Bai & Enderwick, 2003, p.7). Occupational mobility was a rare occurrence (Bian, 2002), and permanent lifetime employment appointments were granted to most employees by the state (Branine, 1997; Maurer-Fazio, 1999). Presently, however, “the Chinese government no longer intervenes in most business operations and no longer controls most economic activities” (Wang & Sprague, 2006, p.28).

This economic transition has brought about changes in the employment structure, including growth in the number of people in China working for private enterprises (Liu & Shang, 2006). By 1997, “more than 12,500 SOEs [state-owned enterprises] had been converted into joint stock companies” (Bai & Enderwick, 2003). The resulting workplace environment requires managers who are trained in the principles of market-based economics and job functions, such as marketing, accounting, and human resources (Bai & Enderwick, 2003). Before economic reform, the state appointed managerial staff within China’s enterprises based on an individual’s status in the political hierarchy in addition to their expertise (Ding & Warner, 2001). However, with the advent of economic changes, decision-making authority—including the decision to hire and fire—devolved from the central government to the enterprise level (Branine, 1997; Ding & Warner, 2001; Maurer-Fazio, 1999). In 2004, the Office of the State Council stated, “China...has established the employment principle of workers findings their own jobs.”

Career Theory in the Chinese Context

Arnold and Jackson (1997) argue that changes occurring in the way work is structured and organized in the United Kingdom and other industrialized nations lead to a need to reconceptualize the meaning of career. This argument appears to be especially true within China. “Traditional ideas on employment emphasize stability, hierarchy, and clearly defined job positions for career progression” (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994, p.307), which was the norm within China prior to the implementation of economic reforms. Now, “people [in China] have been given the right to choose the jobs they like but they [have become] more responsible for the fate of their own future employment” (Branine, 1997, p.80).

The increased importance of the individual in establishing, maintaining, and developing a career leads to the assertion that the individual’s “disposition and competence—their habitus,” in addition to the social context, are essential in understanding careers (Mayrhofer et al., 2004, p.874). Likewise, Arnold and Jackson (1997, p.429) consider the “subjective career” to be an important aspect of the new career theory. The “subjective career” emphasizes the importance of

the individual in career development, including “personal histories, and the skills, attitudes, and beliefs” that each individual has acquired. The shifting career focus from organizational to personal perspective transfers the locus of control from the organization or bureaucratic structures to the individual and his or her choices—a trend that should become increasingly apparent in the transitioning Chinese economy.

“Today, most [Chinese] workers can exercise choice over where they work. They compete based on their education and experience” (Maurer-Fazio, 1999, p.18). This new competition for jobs in the Chinese marketplace highlights the need for greater emphasis on higher education, which “increases its graduates’ range of interchangeability on the job market, making it easier for them to adapt to job shifts and changes” (Xiaohao, 2004, p.40). Evidence of this notion is seen in results from a survey of prospective MBA students. Chinese respondents ($n = 226$) indicated they plan on attending graduate business school to increase their opportunities for more challenging and interesting work and to remain marketable and competitive (GMAC, 2005). Investing in education contributes both to an individual’s ability to build personal capital by developing knowledge, skills, and abilities that will assist with labor market opportunities (Hills & Fleisher, 1997) and to create economic opportunities through entrepreneurial activities. In fact, “according to incomplete statistics, returned [Chinese] overseas scholars have set up more than five-thousand enterprises” (Haiming, 2004, p.8).

Although the traditional organizational career was bound by formal and bureaucratic processes to create predictability, “there is now a need for flexibility, less tangible structures and more versatility” (Adamson, Doherty, & Viney, 1998, p.255). The changes in career patterns should be evident in China’s transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-driven economy. However, the transition of China’s economy

and labor market is based on “a policy of gradual economic reform” (Hills & Fleisher, 1997, p.26). According to Baruch (2004), “many organizations still have a core structure based on bureaucracy” (p.67), and, considering that 28 percent of China’s industrial output in 1998 was derived from state-owned enterprises, many organizations continue to maintain a bureaucratic structure (Bai & Enderwick, 2003). Nevertheless, transformations in China’s organizational landscape coupled with the changing desires of individuals are slowly shaping a new conception of career there. (Altman, 2000).

Methodology

The present study examines the career choices and career paths of Chinese MBA graduates to illuminate the current state of the career concept among this group and is based on several research hypotheses. Each research hypothesis is challenged using a test for monotonic relationships. Considering the measured approach to economic change upon which China has embarked, it is reasonable to expect a gradual shift in the career patterns of its citizens rather than a rapid transformation. As such, this study assumes that if a change in the career concept within China exists, that change would be experienced as a gradual shift—an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary change.

Traditionally, according to Adamson, et al. (1998), “career paths were explicitly marked out by the organizational hierarchy” (p.255). The career was bound by the organization and career development advanced along a linear and hierarchical framework. One’s career advancement proceeded as an ascent up the job ladder, often within a specific functional area. The new concept of career signals increased personal responsibility and control. This shift of career concept from traditional and bounded to boundaryless should be illustrated by an increase in the percentage of respondents who prefer flexible career opportunities.

H1: There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the percentage of MBA graduates preferring flexible career opportunities.

The boundaryless career incorporates various meanings, including moving between organizations and validation beyond the current employer (Arthur, 1994). Career no longer means lifetime employment with a single organization or even within a single industry. As noted previously, Chinese workers were assigned jobs by government labor bureaus prior to the economic reforms that began in 1978. Accordingly, an increase in the percentage of respondents planning to change employers and industries after graduation signifies a change in the career concept.

H2: There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the percentage of MBA graduates who are switching employers after graduation.

H3: There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the percentage of MBA graduates changing industries.

Many studies show that brain-drain occurs when individuals leave their country of citizenship for employment opportunities elsewhere due to a lack of economic and political development at home (Zweig, 1997). With the economic transitions underway in China, it is hypothesized that greater numbers of individuals will plan to return to China for employment upon degree completion. The reversal of the so-called “brain drain” would signify that increasing opportunities exist within China and that these opportunities provide individuals with choices—thus highlighting a change in the career concept from one in which the government assigns work to one in which individuals pursue their own paths.

H4: There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the percentage of Chinese MBA students who intend to work in China after graduation.

As reported earlier, Deng Xiaoping specified that China could benefit from outside expertise in the management arena (Borgonjon & Vanhonacker, 1992). As such, “Some Chinese students still prefer to spend at least a year or two working in the United States both to repay some of their education debt from their higher income and to learn about Western business practices firsthand” (Powell, 2007). This change in the career concept would be evidenced by an increase in the percentage of respondents who intend to work outside of China for a time before returning.

H5: There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the percentage of Chinese MBA students who intend to work outside of China for a time and then return to China for employment opportunities.

Global MBA Graduate Survey

Data for this study are from the online Global MBA Graduate Survey conducted in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007 by GMAC—the global association of leading graduate business schools and provider of the GMAT. Students complete the survey in the final year of their MBA program. The survey objectives are to track the opinions of graduating students regarding their education and their career intentions after graduation.

The sample is developed in two stages. First, GMAC member schools and a number of other schools that use the GMAT exam as a part of their admission process are invited to participate. Next, each participating school provides access to students who are in their final year of the MBA program. All contact with schools and students is conducted online. Although many researchers have objections to the use of online surveys to gather information because of the potential for gaps in survey coverage, the population in the present study have access to and readily use computers and the Internet, thereby reducing the concerns.

Initially, schools receive an e-mail invitation to sign-up for study participation. To take part, schools may either provide GMAC with a list of student names and e-mail addresses or agree to forward the survey

invitation directly to their students. Schools are offered an incentive to participate, which includes free copies of the reports and a unique benchmark report that compares the aggregate responses of their own students with the aggregate responses of student from competitor schools. Survey invitations with unique links are then sent to the students. Follow-up invitations are sent two weeks later to any students who have not yet completed the survey. Students, who have access to the survey for the four-week period

from mid-March to mid-April, are also offered an incentive to participate. The names of all those who complete the questionnaire are placed in a drawing for one of five US\$1,000 cash prizes.

Data from respondents to the Global MBA Graduate Surveys conducted from 2003 through 2007 who indicated that their country of citizenship was the PRC, including Hong Kong, were aggregated and used in this study ($n = 1,425$). Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by survey year.

Table 1. Global MBA Graduate Survey	
Survey Year	Number of Respondents from the PRC
2003	315
2004	402
2005	279
2006	212
2007	217
Total	1,425

Measures

Tracking changes in the career concept requires the use of indirect measures of each individual’s perceptions and experiences. No single measure can determine whether the career concept has changed. Instead, multiple research hypotheses are presented and tested in this paper, and are used to derive information necessary to inform the research question—Has the concept of career changed among Chinese citizens?

Hypothesis 1 relating to preferences for career opportunities is evaluated by asking graduating students to indicate whether they prefer clearly defined

career paths or flexible career opportunities. Respondents were asked, “Each of the following item pairs can be used to describe organizational culture. Most organizations reflect a mixture, but most people prefer one item over the other in each pair. Please choose along the continuum between each opposing pair the point that most closely reflects your preference for an organization’s culture.” Table 2 shows how the question was presented to each respondent during the online survey. For the purpose of analysis in this paper, respondent answers were collapsed into a dichotomous variable of well-defined career path and flexible career opportunities.

Table 2. Representation of Question Used in Hypothesis 1					
Well-defined career path	○	○	○	○	Flexible career opportunities

Hypothesis 2 relating to switching employers after graduation is evaluated by asking graduating students the question, “Currently, in which phase of the job search process are you?” Respondents were asked to select one option from the list provided:

interviewing—no offers received yet, receiving and considering offers, accepted offer from current or previous employing organization, staying with current or previous employing organization, accepted offer from new employing organization, postponing job

search until later, planning to start or manage my own business, and other—please specify. These responses were collapsed into four categories: still searching, accepted offer from current or previous employing organization, accepted offer from a new organization, and self-employed. Hypothesis 2 is evaluated using those respondents who had accepted an offer of employment at the time of the survey, whether from a new or previous organization.

Hypothesis 3 relating to changing industries is evaluated by asking graduating students two questions. First, “In what business or industry did you work before going to graduate business school.” Next, “After you graduate, in what kind of business or industry do you plan to work?” The responses to these questions form the basis of the variable tested in this hypothesis.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 relating to location of employment are evaluated by asking graduating students where they plan to work after graduation. Respondents were provided the following choices in the questionnaire: in your country of citizenship, for a term outside your country of citizenship on a temporary work visa and then seek permanent residency or citizenship, for a term outside your country of citizenship on a temporary work visa and

then return to your country of citizenship, other—please specify, and don’t know. Hypothesis 4 is evaluated by considering those respondents who selected that they plan to work in their country of citizenship. Hypothesis 5 is evaluated by considering those respondents who selected that they plan to work for a term outside their country of citizenship on a temporary work visa and then return to their country of citizenship.

Test for Monotonic Relationships

Each hypothesis in the present study is evaluated using a test for monotonic relationships between two variables (Marascuilo & Serlin, 1988), the variable specified in the hypothesis—the dependent variable, and the respondent’s year of graduation. For the purpose of the analyses, graduation year is recoded into a weight variable (W). For instance, Hypothesis 1 includes four years of data ranging from 2004 through 2007, and the weights assigned are -2, -1, 1, and 2, respectively. For Hypotheses 2 through 5, there are five years of data from 2003 through 2007, and the corresponding weights are -2, -1, 0, 1, and 2, respectively. The weights increase in value and their sum equals zero, which define a contrast. The contrast is:

$$\Psi = W_1\bar{Y}_1 + W_2\bar{Y}_2 \dots W_k\bar{Y}_k$$

“If the means increase, Ψ will be positive, but if the means decrease, Ψ will be negative (Marascuilo & Serlin, 1988).”

The standard error of Ψ is:

$$SE\Psi = \sqrt{MS_w \left[\frac{W_1^2}{N_1} + \frac{W_2^2}{N_2} + \dots \frac{W_k^2}{N_k} \right]}$$

Where MS_w is:

$$MS_w = \frac{(N_1-1)S_1^2 + (N_2-1)S_2^2 + \dots (N_k-1)S_k^2}{(N_1-1) + (N_2-1) + \dots (N_k-1)}$$

With Ψ and $SE\Psi$, $t\Psi$ can be calculated as follows:

$$t_{\psi} = \frac{\psi}{SE_{\psi}}$$

which follows the usual t-statistic distribution.

The null hypotheses corresponding to each research hypothesis was evaluated where $\alpha < .05$.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Career option preferences. The null hypothesis is rejected. There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the percentage of MBA graduates preferring flexible career opportunities ($\psi = .561$; $SE_{\psi} = .095$; $t_{\psi} = -6.104$, $p < .05$). Table 3 presents the associated statistics for

Hypothesis 1. However, the change was not in the direction expected. Rather, since 2004, there has been a decline in the percentage of Chinese respondents who indicated that they prefer flexible career opportunities, whereas the percentage of Chinese respondents who indicated that they prefer a well-defined career path has increased moderately over the study years.

Table 3. Hypothesis 1: Career Option Preference				
Statistic	Graduation Year			
	2004	2005	2006	2007
Mean	.719	.459	.552	.392
Standard deviation	.450	.499	.498	.489
Number of subjects	402	279	212	217
$\psi = -.561$; $SE_{\psi} = .095$; $t_{\psi} = -6.104$; $p < .05$				

Hypothesis 2: Changes in employers. The null hypothesis is not rejected. A monotonic relationship does not exist between the percentage of MBA graduates who are switching employers after

graduation and graduation year ($\psi = .047$; $SE_{\psi} = .169$; $t_{\psi} = .279$; $p > .05$). Table 4 presents the associated statistics for Hypothesis 2.

Table 4. Hypothesis 2: Changes in Employers					
Statistic	Graduation Year				
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Mean	.326	.457	.400	.464	.346
Standard deviation	.471	.501	.493	.502	.479
Number of subjects	92	105	75	69	78
$\psi = .047$; $SE_{\psi} = .169$; $t_{\psi} = .279$; $p > .05$					

Hypothesis 3: Industry changes. The null hypothesis is rejected. There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the

percentage of MBA graduates who are switching industries after graduation ($\psi = .499$; $SE_{\psi} = .100$; $t_{\psi} = 4.971$; $p < .05$). Table 5 presents the associated

statistics for Hypothesis 3. There has been an increase in the percentage of respondents who have indicated

they plan to work in a new industry after graduation.

Table 5. Hypothesis 3: Changes in Industries					
Statistic	Graduation Year				
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Mean	.343	.348	.400	.547	.493
Standard deviation	.475	.477	.491	.499	.501
Number of subjects	286	365	215	161	203
$\downarrow \Psi = .499; SE_{\downarrow \Psi} = .100; t_{\downarrow \Psi} = 4.971; p < .05$					

Hypothesis 4: Planned employment in China. The null hypothesis is rejected. There is a monotonic relationship between graduation year and the percentage of MBA graduates who are intending to work within China after graduation ($\downarrow \Psi = -.253; SE_{\downarrow \Psi} = .089; t_{\downarrow \Psi} = -2.854; p < .05$). Table 6 presents the

associated statistics for Hypothesis 4. However, the change was not in the direction expected. There has been a decrease in the percentage of Chinese respondents who intend to work in China after graduation. Yet, a majority of respondents have plans to work within China in each of the study years.

Table 6. Hypothesis 4: Planned Employment in China					
Statistic	Graduation Year				
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Mean	.755	.821	.703	.624	.727
Standard deviation	.431	.384	.458	.486	.447
Number of subjects	302	391	256	186	194
$\downarrow \Psi = -.253; SE_{\downarrow \Psi} = .089; t_{\downarrow \Psi} = -2.854; p < .05$					

Hypothesis 5: Planned employment outside China before returning. The null hypothesis is rejected. There is a monotonic relationship between the percentage of MBA graduates who are intending to work outside China for a time before returning to China and graduation year ($\Psi = -.715$; $SE\Psi = .138$;

$t\Psi = -5.185$; $p < .05$). Table 7 presents the associated statistics for Hypothesis 5. However, the change was not in the direction expected. There has been a decrease in the percentage of Chinese respondents who intend to work outside of China for a time before returning to China.

Table 7. Hypothesis 5: Planned Employment Outside China Before Returning					
Statistic	Graduation Year				
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Mean	.622	.641	.367	.402	.384
Standard deviation	.486	.481	.484	.492	.489
Number of subjects	196	195	120	117	86
$\Psi = -.715$; $SE\Psi = .138$; $t\Psi = -5.185$; $p < .05$					

Has the concept of career changed among Chinese citizens? Five hypotheses presented in the current study shed light on the career concept among Chinese citizens who embarked on a course of study leading to a graduate business degree. Overall, four of the null hypotheses were rejected. Yet, among these four, three yielded results that contradict—and one yielded results that support—the assumptions of the new career concept. Based on these results, it appears that the career concept among Chinese graduate business students is in a state of fluctuation.

Discussion

This paper explores the career concept from the viewpoint of the Chinese citizen who embarks on a course of study leading to a graduate business degree. China is transitioning from a bureaucratic system marked by government appointments to upper management as reward for job competence and fervent devotion to the Communist party, to a market-based system that rewards effective, efficient, and profitable management performance. Accordingly, changes in the career concept within China would seem to follow suit. However, as the synthesis of hypotheses tested for this paper show, the concept of career among Chinese respondents appears to be in state of flux.

Kelly et al. (2003) suggest that different cultures are “more conducive to self-management and empowerment, flexible work arrangements, and inter-organizational mobility, while others are likely to be more hierarchical, autocratic, and dominated by more centralized management and organizational structures” (p.161). China’s gradual economic shift requires the uprooting of many deep-seated assumptions about careers and career progression. Not only are the traditional foundations of the economy in transition, “but the ‘mind-sets’ associated with them” (Ding & Warner, 2001, p.316) are also in flux. As noted earlier, individuals enjoyed a high degree of career certainty prior to reform when the government routinely assigned them work. By contrast, the employment environment is mired with uncertainty in today’s economic environment, where control of human resources and staffing rests with the organization and with individual choice. Arthur et al. (2005) points out that “employment opportunities will influence career outcomes, as will other contextual variables such as government policy and a person’s social situation” (p.181). Nearly three-quarters of the respondents in 2004 indicated that they preferred flexible career opportunities, which alone suggests that traditional career practices may have been supplanted. Yet, by 2007, a majority of respondents reverted back to a preference for well-defined career paths. This reversal may be a reflection of increasing unemployment, lay-

offs at state factories, increased foreign competition (Forney, n.d.) and the fact that “Chinese graduates are facing their first employment crunch in 30 years” (Robertson, 2007)., Shifting career preferences appear to be adaptations to environmental factors.

The changes in the Chinese economy have generated a need for trained managers among many organizations (Bai & Enderwick, 2003; Ding and Warner, 2001). A majority of the respondents indicated that they plan to remain with their previous employers after graduation, which according to Lan (2004) represents a new trend that emerged in the 1990s among Chinese citizens returning to China. Lan points out that Chinese citizens are returning to help traditional industries advance in the new economy. Furthermore, Butcher and Harvey (1998) consider that the new career development model requires an individual to take advantage of his or her unique capabilities to run an organization. Therefore, it is possible that these graduates intend to use their newly acquired competencies to move up within the organizations in which they were previously employed. Their education has provided them a competitive advantage over co-workers who had not pursued an advanced degree.

Many individuals pursue a graduate management education in order to switch careers (GMAC[®], 2005). Investment in an education is a capital accumulation process in neoclassical economic theory that provides individuals with the ability to respond to changes in the economy (Maurer-Fazio, 1999). Baruch (2004) points to the definition of the protean career of Hall and Mirvis in 1996, “where the individual...[is] changing him/herself according to his/her will and inclination” (p.65). As China transitions its economy and provides opportunities for individual career choice, the increased percentage of graduates planning to pursue employment in new industries demonstrates a willingness to transcend preconceived areas of expertise—a quality that illustrates the new career concept.

“The current situation in China is that opportunities abound but development is difficult” (Lan, 2004, p.32) because China has not reached the maturation point in terms of technology and processes, and improvements are still needed. Individuals leave their country of citizenship for opportunities abroad when difficulties

arise at home. For instance, although small businesses are the backbone of many economies in terms of job creation and innovation, “three-quarters of all bank loans [in China] go to state enterprises” (Forney, n.d., p.3). Furthermore, in the 1990s, China was growing fast and inflation was becoming a problem. The result was government promotion of “stability and restraint, rather than further growth” (Branine, 1997, p.79). The variance in economic performance and policies helps explain why there is no clear pattern in expectations to return to China for employment, although a majority of all the Chinese graduates studied do have plans to return to China.

In a study of cross-cultural careers at the organization level, Kelly et al. (2003) report that Hong Kong has the most traditional career pattern, Singapore and Ireland have less traditional career patterns, and mainland China presents a mix-mode of career patterns. The current study, at the individual level, shows a similar career pattern in China. Among those individuals who had job offers, a majority planned to remain with their pre-MBA employer. Among all respondents, however, the trend appears to favor switching industries after graduation. Even so, responses demonstrated a shift from preference for flexible to well-defined career opportunities. Furthermore, although a majority of respondents intend to work within China, there also appears to be a tendency among those respondents who intend to work outside of China to remain outside of China. The inconsistent results of the current study suggest the career concept in China is undergoing changes that are influenced by various factors, including global economic conditions, government policies and priorities, and social and personal cultural transitions.

As Collins (1998) points out, “to move forward in these uncertain days, scholars will have to find ways of mapping surface changes, without drawing rapid conclusions about deep-seated changes and emergent properties, though remaining alert to their possibility.” Conclusions that articulate significant changes in the career concept among Chinese MBA graduates during the course of the study period are not evident in the current research. However, it appears the concept is in a state of fluctuation and that some shift is underway. Still, Guest and Davey (1996) implore, “Don’t write off the traditional career” yet. The current research

supports this refrain as illustrated by the mixed state of the career concept among Chinese citizens who have pursued a graduate business education.

Like any study, this one has its limitations. While the economy in China has been shifting for 29 years, the data represent the most recent five years. Accessing data prior to economic reform (pre-1978) through the present can prove useful in better understanding the changing concept of career in China. Despite these limitations, the current study does show that the career concept in China, as well as the economy, is undergoing transformation.

The cross-sectional design used to study the career concept limits casual inferences, therefore the results

are based on what the analysis suggests, rather than what it proves. For this reason, future research can track individuals over time using longitudinal study designs, a method also extolled by Collins (1998) as useful in uncovering “deep-seated changes and emergent properties” of the career concept.

Contact Information

For questions or comments regarding study findings, methodology or data, please contact the GMAC Research and Development department at research@gmac.com.

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