

THESIS SUMMARY

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**Understanding the Chinese Early Career Self-Initiated Expatriates in Hungary:
Insights from a two-step-migration pathway and alternative career trajectories**

Ph.D. dissertation

Supervisor:

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Budapest

2024

CORVINUS UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST

Doctoral School of Business and Management

Department of Organizational Behaviour and

Human Resource Development

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I. Research relevance and framework

1.1 Introduction

The shift from university to an early career will likely impact their self-perception of employability and their potential to enter the international employment market (Donald *et al.*, 2018). Opinions about what constraints career mobility in early-career self-initiated Chinese expatriates vary. It has been suggested that the prominence of Chinese cultural values, demography, and career/life phases influence migration decisions. Accordingly, Chinese SIEs transitioning from education to the workforce is a significant career move that should be complemented by career boundarylessness demographically and contextually, while one of the core parts of the definition of SIE is ‘initiative’, it is highly context-dependent (Andresen *et al.*, 2014). The contextual and structural factors affecting SIE’s labour integration are mainly dependent on their host country’s employment structure.

The main target locations of Chinese SIEs are Anglo-Saxon and economically advanced Asian countries, and there is a considerable amount of literature on middle-aged Western expatriates (Yao *et al.*, 2014; Crowley-Henry, 2012). However, there has been a scant discussion of the elements influencing a decision to undertake a self-expatriation outside the Western hemisphere (Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010). Cultural values vary significantly between Confucian and English-speaking or Western European countries (Kemp and Rickett, 2018), while the Chinese involution cycle influences how self-initiated expatriation is perceived and determined. Because of financial constraints, many of them have compromised by choosing a semi-peripheral country like Hungary (Primecz and Li, 2022b).

Hungary is highly suitable as a host country because of the growing relationship between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, including Hungary. This has intensified with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which opened a new chapter in their relations (Turcsányi *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, as Chen and Ugródsy (2019) observe, China and Hungary have set an example for friendly cooperation between countries under the '17+1 Cooperation' platform, which was established based on the shared agreement between China and Central and Eastern European Countries; such semi-peripheral countries receive a relatively large number of students from China, and study programmes mostly in English attract Chinese

applicants. Indeed, in Hungary, the number of self-initiated Chinese students rose by 73% in 2019 compared to 2014. Since 2019, they have been the second-largest international student community after Germans, and the primary group among self-initiated non-European students; as of 2022, Chinese students continue to hold the second position among international students in Hungary (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2020, 2022). However, the Hungarian language is not spoken outside of Hungary, and it is an isolated linguistic system, so learning Hungarian is hardly transferable to other countries.

Knowing the significant numbers and fastest-growing group of Chinese early career SIEs, begs the question of whether Chinese students, who moved to Hungary to study, will remain, return to China, or choose a third country for their employment. Other significant questions include their chances after such temporary mobility, along with whether they face differing career difficulties from those in their native countries. Staying in Hungary remains an alternative strategy for lower-middle class Chinese SIEs, despite involution in their home country. These are important issues to examine, as is whether or not self-expatriating to Hungary from a position of socioeconomic inferiority through the SIE route is an optimal strategy. Besides, the role of credentials (i.e. Chinese and Hungarian) in career development is presented by the different career advancement and challenges when the SIEs are pursuing a cross-border career.

While career development can be regarded as the one major motivation for SIEs to go abroad, there has been surprisingly little discussion on SIEs' career trajectories from a longitudinal perspective. To address this research gap, the dissertation aims to advance the understanding of how the career trajectories of Chinese students graduating in Hungary have developed, how plans are executed when possibilities meet reality in their early career period, and what are the career advancements and challenges that Chinese self-initiated expatriates with both Chinese and Hungarian credentials face in the early stages of their careers. Therefore, this dissertation is unique in the sense that it combines the plans and testimonies of graduates and their actual early career moves.

1.2 Research framework

This is an article-based thesis, which consists of four individual scholarly articles as subsections, and each subsection has been contextualised and synthesised the article. Providing a thoughtful arrangement and presenting a concise summary of

each at the outset can be enlightening, this thesis be presented in a logical and coherent sequence by using a “two-step-migration pathway and alternative career trajectories”, which connected the conception of the expatriation that followed the two-step pathway from being international students to early career self-initiated expatriates, in addition to highlights the importance of comparing the career outcomes of Chinese SIEs with Chinese and Hungarian credentials.

The doctoral dissertation will be built on four papers, two of which have already been published and the other two are submitted to journals and they are in the pipeline. The two published articles have been included in the dissertation and are recorded in the MTMT database, one was published in a Q2 journal, *Intersections*, and the other is published in *Vezetéstudomány*, which is MTA “A” category journal now. Here are the details of the published articles:

1. Li, X. & Primecz, H. (2023). A qualitative exploration of the socioeconomic status and motivations of Chinese students in Hungary. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 9(1), 79–100. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v9i1.814>.

2. Li, X., Primecz, H., & Paget, A. L. (2023). Understanding the Early Career Self-Initiated Expatriation: A Review and Directions for Future Research. *Vezetéstudomány / Budapest Management Review*. 54(5), 18–30. <https://doi.org/10.14267/VEZTUD.2023.05.02>

Two further articles are currently in the pipeline. The first paper, titled "Career Trajectories of Self-Initiated Early Career Chinese Expatriates in Hungary: Two-step Migration pathway perspective?" was submitted to *Vezetéstudomány / Budapest Management Review* (MTA “A”) in September, 2023, and received a minor revision decision. The second paper, titled "Does Local Education Matter in Semi-periphery country? Comparative Analyses of Early Career Chinese Self-initiated Expatriates in Hungary" was submitted to *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* (Q1) on 11th of January, 2024, and it is under revision now.

The first article explores three important factors that influenced lower-middle-class Chinese students’ choices to study in Hungary. In the second article, I used both functionalist and interpretivist approaches to do a literature review on discussing early career self-initiated expatriates’ personal career motivations, behaviours, and the phenomenon’s relevance to the global workforce. The third article

follows the line of the “two-step-migration pathway” to explore the career trajectories of self-initiated Chinese expatriates, who migrated to Hungary to study and evaluate their career options abroad. The fourth article focuses on the outcomes associated with career success among Chinese SIEs in Hungary and examines the role of Chinese and Hungarian credentials in the career development of such individuals and how these impact their opportunities and mobility in the job market.

1.3 Research question

The main question:

What are the career options, subjective success and challenges for Chinese early career self-initiated expatriates in Hungary?

This question is further divided into sub questions:

- What are the socioeconomic status and primary motivations of Chinese graduates in Hungary?
- What are the career options, including self-initiated expatriates, of Chinese graduates in Hungary and Europe?
- How do early career Chinese SIEs with varying credentials evaluate their career success?
- How to define local education beneficial for the host country's (Hungarian) employment market?

II. Literature review

2.1 Terminology of the self-initiated expatriation

In the 21st century, the knowledge economy, technological innovation, migration flows, specialisation, work values, and labour markets have all changed dramatically with the development of a globalized economy. This has profoundly affected the individual career development of employees and the organisational career management of companies (Yang and Chen, 2020). SIEs are different from corporate-assigned expatriates, who have more autonomy to choose their career location, and the SIEs leverage their stronger cross-cultural adaptability to build their career capital during the expatriate experience and thus achieve career success (Kanstrén and Suutari, 2021; Wongsuwan and Na-Nan, 2022). At the same time, as SIEs are not supported by organizations, their characteristics play a critical role (Lauring and Selmer, 2018) in their organizational success and eventually in their career.

2.2 The early career of international graduates' self-initiated expatriation

There is evidence that there is a direct relationship between foreign education and improved employment outcomes. 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 securing employment (Abimbola et al., 2016; Jonbekova et al., 2021; Pham, 2020; Wu et al., 2020). When international graduates entered the employment market, they started their career trajectories, which are different from their professional positions. For instance, in the early stages of their careers, SIEs have more ambitions for mobility and may gain international experience on the entry-level professional road. Tharenou (2003) conducted a study on 213 young entry-level occupations (average age 23), using social cognitive career theory, taking age, gender, and marital status into consideration; she concluded that these early career SIEs had high levels of personal agency and were less influenced by their families. With worldwide options, their openness to foreign professions increased.

2.3 Early career self-initiated expatriation

There is a growing body of literature on the topic of early career self-initiated expatriates. For early career self-initiated expatriates, international experience can provide a valuable opportunity to gain cross-cultural experience and broaden their skill sets, but they must also navigate the challenges of adjusting to life in a new country (Pereira et al, 2016; Wechtler, 2018). Inkson and Myers (2003) confirmed that the transition to life in a new country can be a critical period, as they seek to build their professional networks and establish their careers while also adjusting to a new culture. From the contextual and organisational perspective, Goštautaitė et al. (2020) put forward there is a negative correlation between the intention to initiate self-expatriation and the level of career and community embeddedness in one's home country. According to Felker (2011), organisations are missing out on the potential benefits of Eastern European human capital in the context of SIEs, suggesting that there may be unexplored opportunities to gain a competitive advantage. Individually, Pereira et al. (2016) demonstrate that the young, skilled, and mobile SIEs, tend to rely on their resources and information to secure employment opportunities.

2.4 Career success and challenges for SIEs

Career success refers to the overall achievement and fulfilment of professional goals, it differs from career advancement, which essentially highlights the progression of a person's career (Bowles et al., 2019). Career success is a multifaceted concept that encompasses objective and subjective career success (Arthur et al., 2005; Briscoe et al., 2021). By considering their subjective perceptions of career success, we aim to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how SIEs' career capital influences their career development. Early career self-initiated expatriates can bring unique perspectives and energy to their new home, but they may also face obstacles in establishing their careers. Researchers have studied the career opportunities and challenges faced by early career self-initiated expatriates, including the impact of their move on their careers, their access to professional networks, and how they can overcome barriers to career advancement. For the early career SIEs, they are aware of repatriation, confusing their career road. Milne (2001) claimed that young SIEs with characteristics of better qualified and fitter, and want to possess more skills when they choose to return.

2.5 Overview of the early career expatriate experience in Hungary

Chinese SIEs mainly target Anglo-Saxon and economically advanced Asian countries. While there is a considerable amount of 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 settlement destination for the Chinese middle-class couples, , discovering that the primary motivation is driven by factors such as favorable living conditions, desire to provide their children with a joyful childhood, highlighting the significance of migration for escaping the educational pressure, intense competition, and economic burdens associated with the upbringing of children in China (Beck & Gaspar,2023; Beck & Nyiri, 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 and 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 self-initiated non-European students. As of 2022, Chinese students continue to hold the second position among international students in Hungary. 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.

2.6 Local education and foreign credentials

There is limited research on factors beyond local credentials and education that affect early career SIEs. The existing literature mainly focuses on establishing a positive correlation between local education and employment prospects in the host country (Van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2019). Furthermore, researchers have examined the outcomes for employees holding foreign qualifications in their home countries. It transpires that foreign credentials may have no impact on securing employment in their country of origin, leading to a certain degree of mismatch and underemployment (Risberg and Romani, 2022).

III. Methodology

3.1 Method

A qualitative interpretive approach was adopted because this enables the researcher to discover unforeseen facts (Hennink et al., 2011). The approach recognises that individuals give their meanings to events and situations. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth study of people's accounts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being examined (Crotty, 1998). I maintain that a qualitative study design is the most appropriate method for addressing research questions in this case because the study is exploratory. Based on my international experience and network, it appears that the topic has not been previously researched by other scholars.

Selecting a research paradigm that aligns with one's beliefs about reality is essential for a robust research design. Interrogating these beliefs ontologically at the outset can reveal various epistemological and methodological options. Researchers who use constructivism-grounded theory and thematic analyses in qualitative research do not arrive at a conclusion or resolution quickly or easily regarding their understanding of truth and reality. Rather, they are influenced by cultural context, which shapes their perspective on the research, the creative forces involved, and the meaning of truth. Constructivism is a research paradigm that refutes the existence of an objective reality, instead maintaining that realities are constructed socially in the mind, and as many such constructions exist as there are individuals, though many constructions will be shared (Lincoln and Guba, 2013). The research is conducted from a social constructionist perspective. The author believes that constructivism is the most suitable approach to answer the research question, as individuals create their realities by interpreting their experiences in innumerable unique ways (Burr, 2003). The research design is presented in Figure 1.

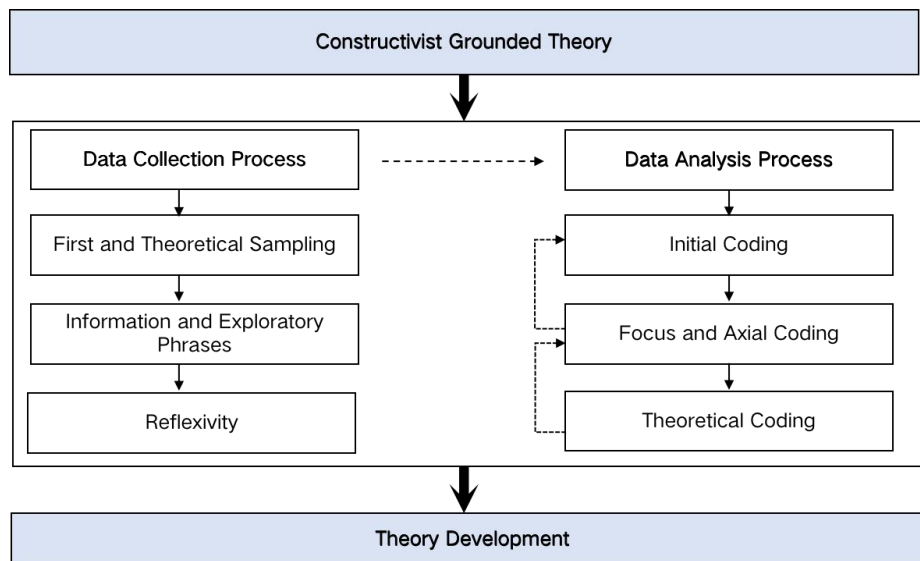


Figure 1 Methodological Structure

(Source: Author conceptualisation)

3.2 Data collection

To fully understand their career trajectories over time, this research adopts a two-step expatriation pathway and includes interviewees in different phases of their self-initiated expatriation period. Before delving into the empirical research, it is relevant to discuss the different phases of graduates' transition into their early careers. Therefore, this research selected three types of interviewees at different stages. One phase is about Chinese students in Hungary and their lived experiences, the second phase Chinese students who came to Hungary to study and started to work, the third phase Chinese SIEs in Hungary, who arrived in Hungary merely for work purposes including some who have Hungarian credentials and who do not.

The three empirical papers have three distinct samples. The first article is built on 26 interviews. The second empirical article includes online interviews and observations of the interviewees' public blogs. The third empirical article covers 22 new interviews. This data collection phase took place from the end of September to the end of October 2022, and the sample was different from the second phase because the research was to seek out Chinese early-career SIEs with both Chinese and Hungarian credentials.

3.3 Data analysis

To analyse the data, the researcher followed Charmaz's (2006, 2020) three-step approach: line-by-line coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. The first author analysed the data in Chinese and only translated potential quotations. In the first step, the researcher read the transcript and provided a remark for each phrase or paragraph, using terms that summarized the investigated information or concept. The researcher also created a logbook to note each respondent's views of the content and direction of the reading. The second step involved developing axial coding to recompose the data and give coherence to the emerging analysis. This step highlighted the dimensions and properties of the data within a context and allowed for more precise explanations that answered questions of when, where, why, who, how, and with what results.

The third step involved theoretical coding, which provided a more sophisticated level of categorisation and allowed for the comparison of categories to build and enhance theoretical links. Using the constructivist grounded theory approach, the researcher asked Chinese SIE participants the three connected research questions, resulting in the inductive identification and development of ideas from the data.

IV. Research results and contributions

I have organised my dissertation into three distinct chapters to ensure an overview of the research process (Figure 2). The first chapter provides an overview of the research problems, the purpose of the thesis and the research questions, it also gives a brief description of the individual articles and how they contribute to the overall thesis. Subsequently, the positioning theory and philosophical background were presented to give a better academic understanding of the results. The next subsection is the literature review, which provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature and theoretical framework of the self-initiated expatriation and career trajectories, including cultural reproduction and cultural mobility, cultural, social and career capital theories, terminology of the self-initiated expatriation, the early career of international graduates' self-initiated expatriation, early career self-initiated expatriation, career advancement and challenges for self-initiated expatriates, overview of the early career expatriate experience in Hungary. It also demonstrates how the research contributes to the existing knowledge in the field.

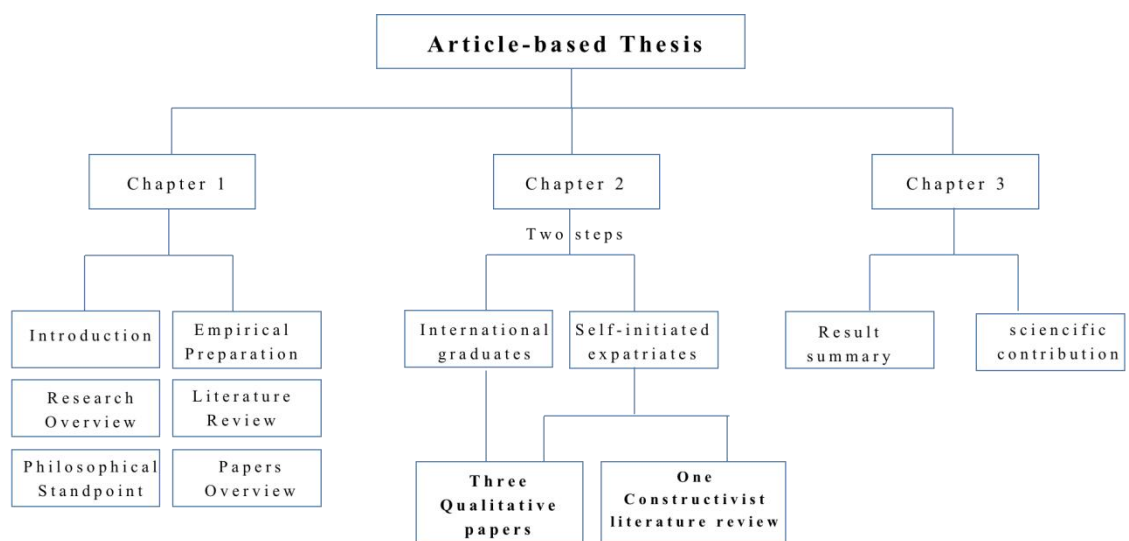


Figure 2 Structure of the dissertation

4.1 Overview to the four papers

1st Paper: A qualitative exploration of the socioeconomic status and motivations of Chinese students in Hungary

Based on the “two-step-migration pathway”, higher education experiences is crucial for analysing the motivation for expatriation to Hungary. Besides, education

has gradually become a crucial element in attaining higher socioeconomic status, so it is vital to understand such students' socioeconomic backgrounds and motivation for studying in Central-Eastern Europe. Thus, after searching the literature on culture reproduction by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), career capital by DiMaggio (1982), and some context-related literature on the Bologna Process and educational mobility with respect to Hungary, this paper applied cultural mobility theory, this article explores students' family backgrounds and motivations for pursuing tertiary education in Hungary.

The research questions necessitated a qualitative methodology and semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with twenty-six Chinese students studying in Hungary as a data collection method. This was augmented by observation before and after the interviews, which was noted in a research diary. And a purposive sampling method was applied to create the most reliable sample. Regarding the data analyse the process, I adapted elements of the grounded theory (G.T.) approach for the data analysis, as summarised by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Interviews and research diary notes were the basis of the data analysis. The first phase, open coding of data, involved the naming and categorisation of phenomena through close examination. This was followed by axial coding, with the explicit aim of understanding the data more deeply. Finally, selective coding was applied, whereby more abstract analysis was conducted, and the grounded model was constructed from the empirical data, named constraints of reality, educational desires and self-expression values.

The results indicate that three important factors influenced lower-middle-class Chinese students' choices to study in Hungary: the constraints of reality, educational aspirations, and a desire for self-expression. Working-class or lower-middle-class families were required to make compromises for their children to study abroad because their financial means limited the opportunity for international study. Therefore, education in a relatively low-cost country like Hungary became an option. This research contributes to current theories of educational mobility by offering fresh understandings of students with a lower-middle socioeconomic status, the influx of working-class Chinese students into Hungary, as well as the relationship between upward social mobility and studying internationally. The recommendations for policymakers in China and Hungary made in this paper enable the development of practicable strategies for enhancing learning environments, producing positive educational outcomes, fostering equitable education systems, and ameliorating the

impact of a lower socioeconomic background on educational and social mobility.

2nd Paper: Understanding the Early Career Self-Initiated Expatriation: A Review and Directions for Future Research

The self-initiated expatriate who finds work outside of their home country is a significant topic and extant research on the self-initiated expatriation currently resides across different disciplines, forming a relevant topic for theoretical and practical contribution. Global and multinational enterprises' labour demands for foreign graduates are consistent with young graduates self-initiating international work opportunities (Doherty, 2010). In the field of career management, the SIE groups (Tharenou 2003) are the most relevant management field to explore. Early career self-initiated expatriates can be a source of competitive advantage for organisations because they are flexible, devoted to work and open to experiencing new things (Kemp and McLoughlin, 2022; Rajneet and Papor, 2020). This review analyses academic articles published on self-initiated expatriates (SIE) with a special focus on early-career expatriates.

Acknowledging the value of both functionalist and interpretivist approaches, the multiparadigm strategy was chosen (Primecz, 2008; Primecz et al. 2023). Relying on functionalist principles, the first author began with a systematic approach to identify key articles from multiple disciplines, searching three journal databases, namely Web of Science, Google Scholar and Proquest Thesis database between 2003 and 2022 with the following keywords: immigration, early career expatriates, entry-level position, international graduate student, student affairs professionals, motivation, challenges, resilience, repatriation, culture adaptation. The literature search was completed in two waves. In the first wave, 1703 academic publications were identified by keyword search, including journal articles, theses, books, book chapters, and conference papers. The VOSviewer software was used to study the literature related to the career of expatriates in the field of global career management from an empirical perspective through literature statistics and econometric analysis methods (Andersen, 2021). Therefore, the VOSviewer software was utilised to scan global expatriates' long-term career development paths and research progress in the first place. In the second wave of literature search top-ranked publications in international management and business were scrutinized, which was conducted by the third author. The journal selection on their international ranking and their significance in the researched field (Tüselmann et al., 2016). Therefore, core IB journals, namely

International Business Review (IBR), Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS), Journal of International Management (JIM), Journal of World Business (JWB) and Management International Review (MIR) were considered. Furthermore, based on the chosen research topic two highly relevant journals were added to the selection, where the majority of the articles in this area are published, namely Career Development International and Journal of Global Mobility.

In the end, inspired by the analysis of qualitative scholars in related fields, this research adopts the interpretive approach in order to delve into the content of the identified articles more deeply. This exploration plays a critical role in promoting the selection and in-depth development of research topics in the management field as well. Our first analysis of these papers showed a plethora of cross-disciplinary notions and terminology (e.g. job, employment, occupation, career; immigration, self-initiated expatriate; early career, young graduate, entry-level position). Abstracts (including titles and keywords) of 81 articles were reviewed by the first and second authors, and based on the content of the abstracts and title, they agreed to read 22 articles in full text. The reading and coding of full-text articles were done by the first author, and it led to the elimination of six articles, which proved to be irrelevant when the content of the full text was thoroughly investigated. The selected 16 articles were coded, and in order to ensure full coverage of published articles in the chosen topic further articles were searched for. By using snowballing strategy, the first author followed references and cites to these publications during the full-text analysis until no new relevant publications were found. The qualifying publications were evaluated and subsequently analysed based on particular research that addressed the issues. The study was carried out by thoroughly reading full texts. Eventually, 19 articles were identified as key articles of early career SIEs. As a result of the coding process and elaboration in depth on the interplay analysis among different levels and formulation three main themes emerged, which was validated by the second author.

In terms of coding schemes, authors organised analysis at the contextual, organisational, and individual levels using various coding processes. The early career SIE has then been explored from a range of viewpoints, as shown in Figure 2, which synthesises the following theoretical models from the research evaluated into a complete field map. Finally, a research gap may be identified in the kinds of literature.

In this paper, we discuss early career self-initiated expatriates' personal career

motivations, behaviours, and the phenomenon's relevance to the global workforce. First of all, it is found that among the structural factors, the main reason that affects the work performance and success rate of SIEs in their early career is their cultural adaptability to different national structures. Besides, the organisational level plays a key role in helping SIE in the early career transition to new cultural adaptation, especially through the intervention of organisations in the adjustment period (Hippler et al., 2014). This demonstrates the role of psychological availability as a means of psychological engagement for SIEs and their host-country national colleagues during work and interaction adjustment processes. This view is consistent with the conclusions of Jannesari et al. (2017). Lastly, an individual's ability to adapt to the expatriate culture is the main factor that affects his mission success rate, which is also the main reason for reducing expatriates' turnover intention.

There are some points worth reflecting on in the previous literature. Firstly, summarising the above structure, organisation and individual level, to explore the post-COVID-19 epidemic influences on the early career SIEs' attitude and behaviour, it is very important to manage and develop the subsequent career of SIEs in the early career. Secondly, individuals who lived in a foreign country as teenagers regard themselves as international, have higher openness to different cultures, have greater international job preferences, travel and future orientation, and have lower settling-down inclinations (Selmer and Lam, 2003). Since there is a lack of this kind of literature which compares early career SIEs to those who are born in the local country. Therefore, it is advisable to analyse how adult third culture kids (ATCKs) view their future ability to complete international tasks. Thirdly, future research can address differences between young and older employees, and the organisation's concentration may be most relevant to the initial development of receptivity.

3rd Paper: Career Trajectories of Self-Initiated Early Career Chinese Expatriates in Hungary

This paper explores the career trajectories of self-initiated Chinese expatriates, who migrated to Hungary to study and evaluates their career options abroad. It applies theories of social and cultural mobility, after describing the early career of international graduates' self-initiated expatriation, uncovered 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 method by analysing

the semi-structured interviews of 22 Chinese graduates, considering their careers abroad. The data came from two sources: semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author, and then further data was collected from publicly available sources, such as social media, blogs and observation of the Chinese community in Hungary, which collectively constituted the initial data. Regarding sampling development, the initial criteria for these potential participants were needed to screen whether the person fits the criteria of a Chinese SIE, who was educated in Hungary. Personal contacts were utilised to identify and approach individuals who fitted the required profile (Doherty, 2013): (a) their initial intention and their expectation at the time of the interviews was for a temporary move; (b) they have legally moved and are legally residing and working in the host country; (c) the move to the host country was of their own free will rather than due to factors that may have forced them to flee their countries of origin, such as civil war, persecution, due to political beliefs, or famine; (d) the reason for their movement — that is, they entered Hungary as a student — and have initiated their employment afterwards.

In the data analysis phase, the three steps of analysis described by Charmaz (2006, 2020) — line-by-line coding, axial coding and theoretical coding — are grouped around the researcher's description of the analysis in this section. 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 recompose data and give coherence to the emerging analysis, highlighting its dimensions and properties within a context, allowing for more precise explanations that respond to the phenomenon with questions of when, where, why, who, how, and with what results, so as to write the studied experience in a more comprehensive manner. 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 findings reveal ambiguity in the advantages and disadvantages of each of the potential choices, including repatriation, remaining, and moving to another European country. The situation is even more problematic for women, who experience considerable pressure to start a family, preferably in China, no matter

whether they repatriate or move to other European countries. While research participants made significant investments in their education when they decided to study in Hungary, it is not obvious that their financial, emotional, intellectual, and social investments pay off. The first group, the returnees, face uncertainty when their degrees are evaluated against other foreign degrees, especially in comparison with Anglo-Saxon and Chinese degrees, which are viewed more positively in China. The hope to return home with valuable degrees is, therefore, unclear. The second group, early career SIEs working in Hungary, face other difficulties. While their degrees are accepted in the Hungarian employment market, they always have disadvantages, compared to local employees, due to language barriers. The third group, the advantageous career seekers entering new countries, face double difficulties: their degrees are less known and accepted and they have numerous disadvantages, including language barriers, lack of social capital, and difficulties in understanding a new context, culture, and rules.

4th Paper: Does Local Education Matter? Comparative Analyses of Early Career Chinese Self-initiated Expatriates in Hungary

While numerous studies have compared company-initiated international assignments and inter-organizational moves between SIEs and assigned expatriates (Selmer et al., 2016; Suutari et al., 2017), recent research is currently extending beyond such comparisons to include a more comprehensive range of global careers, particularly focusing on the experiences of SIEs (Al Ariss and Özbilgin, 2010 ; Andresen et al., 2014; Brewster et al., 2021; Cerdin and Selmer, 2014; Primecz, 2023). Among this group, early career SIEs are considered by global and multinational organisations as an immediate supply of labour and a group devoted to working because they are flexible, devoted to work and open to experiencing new things, and have unique characteristics that set them apart from other expatriates (Pereira et al, 2016; Wechtler, 2018). This group is characterised by its youth (Yao et al., 2014), lack of financial resources (Israel and Cohen, 2022), and limited experience in international work environments (Wechtler et al., 2023). It is, therefore, necessary to discuss the career trajectories of SIEs from a longitudinal perspective, with their early-career period as a starting point (Li et al., 2023).

Previous literature has explored the influence of host country nationals and its cultural characteristics on the career development of SIEs (Singh et al., 2021), along with knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing between SIEs and organisations

(Shao and Ariss, 2020; Singh et al., 2022). The literature mainly focuses on establishing a positive correlation between local education and employment prospects in the host country (Van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2019). Nevertheless, there is limited research on factors beyond local credentials and education that affect early career SIEs and SIEs to semi-periphery countries. Therefore, our intention is to address the gap in the literature regarding the decision-making processes and outcomes of Chinese individuals, when choosing to pursue career opportunities in semi-peripheral countries, such as Hungary.

This research focuses on the outcomes associated with career success among Chinese SIEs in Hungary and examines the role of Chinese and Hungarian credentials in the career development of such individuals and how these impact their opportunities and mobility in the job market. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to and outcomes of education in East Central Europe and for early career SIEs in the context of semi-peripheral countries, our study aims to address the following research questions: (1) How to define local education beneficial for the host country's (Hungarian) employment market? (2) How do early career Chinese SIEs with varying credentials evaluate their career success?

The purpose and scope of the research align with thematic analysis, since extended and immersive cross-cultural experiences require individuals to move beyond their culturally engrained attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions. The subjective nature of global mobility experiences requires qualitative researchers to maintain reflexivity and awareness of their own experiences and preconceptions throughout the research process (Primecz, 2023). To develop the sample, specific criteria were established to identify potential participants, who met the characteristics of early career Chinese SIEs. Personal contacts were used to identify and approach individuals, meeting the following requirements (Doherty, 2013): (a) their initial intention was to move temporarily; (b) they legally moved to and resided in the host country as Chinese citizens; (c) the move was voluntary, not due to factors such as persecution or civil war; (d) they had fewer than five years of work experience, or were below 35 years old. Additionally, participants met a criterion relevant to SIE status by holding Chinese or Hungarian credentials before joining the Hungarian job market.

The findings reveal two distinct types of early-career Chinese SIEs with Chinese credentials in Hungary: those using their Hungarian experience as a stepping stone for long-term career mobility and those who perceive it as beneficial for their

career objectives. Chinese SIEs with Hungarian credentials can also accumulate career capital, but their futures remain more uncertain. The findings also reveal the impact of gaining qualifications in Hungary, for Chinese SIEs with different credentials did not have a clearly defined career path.

4.2 Contribution

Theoretically, after analysing the related multi-disciplinary research results on the early career of active expatriates in recent years, it can provide academic valuable information on early career management. Specifically, on the one hand, the research provides a definition of early career self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), as well as identifying specific criteria and characteristics that are relevant to early career SIEs. On the other hand, this study is important for understanding the protean and boundaryless careers of early career self-initiated expatriates and immigrants, the main theoretical contribution of this paper is the conceptualisation and exploration of early career Chinese SIEs' career trajectories and challenges, based on constructivist grounded theory. In addition, the research provides insights into the career development and capital of SIEs from the same country but with diverse backgrounds and credentials.

Practically, it offers a focused examination of the experiences and challenges faced by early career SIEs, highlighting the impact of cultural and contextual factors on career mobility, which is valuable to graduates and employers. The results can help graduates start their careers on an upward trajectory, and provide insight for employers into the pre-employment psychological contract and career mindfulness, enabling organisations to support self-initiated expatriates as much as possible. This research also has practical implications for policymakers in Hungary and its immediate vicinity by a better understanding of early career SIEs' career decisions and challenges with similar socioeconomic status individuals.

Considering that early career SIEs of Chinese origin comprise a substantial part of the global SIE population (Finaccord, 2014; InterNations, 2021), empirical research on Chinese SIEs is essential. Therefore, this dissertation is a context-rich empirical research, that aims to fill the gaps in the Sino-Hungarian literature, even in Semi-periphery countries, because there is limited research on the SIEs' career trajectories in Hungary.

V. Summary

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the career trajectories of Chinese self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) in Hungary over time, this study was conducted as exploratory research. The research uses a two-step expatriation pathway to illustrate the career progression of Chinese SIEs in Hungary, starting from their graduation to early career stages. The study covers topics such as career options, advancement opportunities, and challenges faced by these individuals.

In order to provide a comprehensive and insightful examination of the subject matter, this thesis adopts a thoughtful arrangement and presents a concise summary of each section at the outset. By doing so, it aims to enlighten the readers and facilitate their understanding of the research findings. The thesis be organised in a logical and coherent sequence, following the framework of the "two-step migration pathway and alternative career trajectories." This framework establishes a connection between the concept of expatriation and the specific journey taken by individuals from being international students to becoming early career self-initiated expatriates. By exploring this pathway, the thesis shed light on the various stages, challenges, and opportunities that arise during the career development process of these individuals.

Furthermore, the thesis places significant emphasis on comparing the career outcomes of Chinese self-initiated expatriates with individuals holding Chinese and Hungarian credentials. By employing this framework and comparative approach, the thesis aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of the subject matter. It seeks to highlight the complexities and variations within the career trajectories of international graduates and early career self-initiated expatriates. This not only enriches the existing body of knowledge but also contributes to a more comprehensive perspective on the factors influencing career development in this specific context.

Overall, the thesis aims to provide a logical and coherent analysis by utilising the "two-step migration pathway and alternative career trajectories" framework. By examining the career outcomes of Chinese self-initiated expatriates in relation to their different credentials, the thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals in this unique career path.

VI. Author's publications in the field

Peer-reviewed journal articles:

1. Li, X. & Primecz, H. (2023). A qualitative exploration of the socioeconomic status and motivations of Chinese students in Hungary. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 9(1), 79–100. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v9i1.814>
2. Li, X., Primecz, H., & Paget, A. L. (2023). Understanding the Early Career Self-Initiated Expatriation: A Review and Directions for Future Research. *Vezetéstudomány / Budapest Management Review*. 54(5), 18–30. <https://doi.org/10.14267/VEZTUD.2023.05.02>
3. Li, X. *Chinese Students Choosing Hungarian Tertiary Education: A Systematic Review*. *East Asia*. 37, 317–330 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-020-09333-y>
4. Li, X. & Primecz, H. *The Future Plans and Dilemmas of Chinese Students Studying in Hungary: A Narrative Analysis*. *Society and Economy*, 43 (04), 1-17 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1556/204.2021.00015>
5. Primecz, H & Li, X. Magyarországon tanuló kínai hallgatók társadalmi háttere és belépési nehézségei (Social background and entry difficulties of Chinese students studying in Hungary). *Educatio*. 2021,12(04):713-721. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2063.30.2021.4.12>
6. Primecz, H & Li, X. Kínai hallgatók nehézségei magyarországi tanulmányaik alatt és után (Chinese students' difficulties during and after studying in Hungary). *Educatio*. 2022,(02):294-302. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2063.31.2022.2.9>

International conference presentations:

1. Li, X. & Primecz, H. Understanding the Early Career Self-Initiated Expatriation: A Review and Directions for Future Research. European Academy of Management (EURAM) Conference, Dublin, Ireland, June, 2023.
2. Li, X. & Primecz, H. Transitioning from University to Early Career: Exploring the Career Perceptions and Employability of Chinese Self-Initiated Expatriates in Hungary. International Association of Cross-cultural Competence and Management (IACCM) conference, Naples, Italy, October, 2023.
3. Li, X. Cross Cultural Research of Identity Construction and Learning Shock: A

Grounded Theory of Chinese Students in Hungary. Nordic Academy of Management. Online, December, 2021.

4. Li, X. Literature Review on the Factors that Chinese Students Pursuing Higher Education in Hungary. A steam on Migration / Identity / Power: Integration and Cross Cultural Management Challenges (EURAM). Dublin, Ireland, June, 2020.

5. Li, X. International mobility and cultural reproduction: The case of Chinese students in Hungary. The Pre-Forum Session of Shanghai Forum 2019 - Global Governance and Asia from the Perspective of the CEE Countries. June 2019, Budapest, Hungary.

6. Li, X. Chinese Students Tertiary Educational Mobility and Stratification in Hungary. The Inclusion, Mobility, and Multilingual Education Conference: Exploring the role of languages for education and development. Bangkok, Thailand, September, 2019.

7. Li, X. Sojourner and Social Stratification. The 8th Conference of the Chinese Association of Social Psychology. Yunnan Province, China, July 2018.

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