Voluntary Career Transition of Managers in China: a grounded theory study

Judy Yi Sun

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VOLUNTARY CAREER TRANSITION OF MANAGERS IN CHINA:
A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

by

JUDY YI SUN

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Human Resource Development and Technology
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The University of Texas at Tyler
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The University of Texas at Tyler
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Abstract

VOLUNTARY CAREER TRANSITION OF MANAGERS IN CHINA: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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The purpose of this study is to investigate Chinese managers’ voluntary career transitions (VCTs) in the contemporary Chinese organizational and socioeconomic context to offer an understanding and an explanation of the mass VCT phenomenon coupled with the Chinese organizational transformation. The study followed a qualitative research design with the traditional grounded theory approach. Following a theoretical sampling process, twenty-two Chinese managers were selected and interviewed for the study.

The findings were reported in relation to three guiding research questions. A contextualized typology of VCTs emerged from data that revealed different patterns of VCTs from behavioral, cognitive and affective aspects. Career authenticity was found to be a major construct emerged from the data with three dimensions, career aspiration, career identity, and sensitivity of person-organization match.
This study contributes to the literature by integrating the disparate research in VCT and Voluntary Turnover (VTO) and examines the phenomenon from a unique lens in the Chinese context. I derived a theory of managerial VCTs in the Chinese context centered on the core category of career authenticity. It revealed that VCT experiences were determined by career authenticity and its dimensions reflecting the dynamic interactions between the true self and the career environment, either perceived or experienced. Future studies are needed to confirm, validate, and refine the theory through both qualitative and quantitative research.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the research literature on the career transition phenomenon and specifically within the context of China. It also describes the shortcomings in the literature and identifies the research questions that will guide this study. Additionally, the chapter overviews the research design and articulates the significance of the study.

The Background of the Problem

Ample evidence in the scholarly literature suggests that career transition is an increasingly important phenomenon in Human Resource Development (HRD) and Human Resource Management (HRM) in contemporary organizations (Hall, 1997, 2002; McDonald & Hite, 2005, 2008; Sullivan, 1999; Sun, 2009; Sun & Wang, 2009). It has been extensively studied in the last three decades both as a critical component of career development (Ebberwein, Krieshok, Ulven, & Prosser, 2004; Louis, 1980; Wise & Millward, 2005) and as a major challenge confronting all organizations (Ng, Sorensen, Eby, & Feldman, 2007; Nicholson, & West, 1989; Trevor, Hausknecht, & Howard, 2007).

Traditionally, a career is considered to be a progressive sequence of jobs in a linear pattern along a defined path within organizations (Sullivan, 1999). Career transition is defined as “a change of job or profession, or a change in one’s orientation to work while continuing in the same job” (Louis, 1980, p. 330). It includes both extrinsic career transition, such as inter-company transition and inter-profession
transition, and intrinsic career transition, such as intra-role transition (Louis, 1980; Sun & Wang, 2009b).

Career transition across organizational boundaries is often viewed as a deviant exception or something ideally to be avoided by individuals and organizations (Hall, 2002). It has become more common since the 1970’s due to economic changes in the United States, especially organizational restructuring, increasing globalization and competition (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Consequently, the norm of holding one job and remaining with one organization for the whole career life has gradually given way to a new pattern of periodic job changes (Sullivan, 1999).

With the decay of the traditional career, “protean” and “boundaryless” careers characterized by constant job change, self-invention, autonomy, and self-direction have been observed in the Western career development literature (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002). These concepts assert that individuals have increasing responsibility to address constant ambiguity, to prepare for career changes caused by frequently encountered organizational restructuring and reengineering, technology advancement, and industry reshuffles (Arthur et al., 1991, 1999; Hall, 1996, 2002; Herriot & Pemberton, 1996; King et al., 2005). Consequently, career transition has become an unavoidable experience and even a career strategy for individuals to accumulate knowledge, skills, expertise, and marketability in order to advance their careers proactively (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Hall, 1996, 2002; Herriot & Pemberton, 1996; King et al., 2005). Therefore, voluntary career transitions (VCTs), defined as an individual taking the initiative to leave an organization and join another organization or occupation, have been a popular phenomenon receiving increasing attention in the literature (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980, Neapolitan, 1980).
The importance of VCTs across organizational boundaries has received growing attention from both the academic community and HRD and HRM professionals. For instance, a study in the United Kingdom (UK) showed that in 1983, 61 percent of a sample of members of the British Institute of Managers had had three or more employers in their career; in a comparable study in 1958, only 24 percent of an equivalent group had had three or more employers. More recently, it has been reported that the median employment period for U.S. workers was just four-and-a-half years, and six years for managers (Arthur, Inkson, & Pingle, 1999). Some scholars acknowledge that the popularity of inter-organizational transitions reflects a new relationship between organizations and employees (Hall & Associates, 1996).

The increase in career transitions across organizational boundaries, especially VCTs, creates significant challenges for organizations in retaining and developing talents. As a result, recent research in HRD and HRM has placed greater emphasis on recruiting, retaining, and developing organizational talents. This trend is not only reflected by an intensive focus on skills, knowledge, and performance in organizations (e.g. Hall, 2002; Louis, 1980; Swanson & Holton, 2009; Tuchi & Carr, 1971), but also represented by renewed interest in career development research in the HRD literature (e.g. McDonald & Hite, 2005, 2008). Similarly, the importance of retaining talents has been chronicled in the recent HRM literature (e.g., Allen & Griffeth, 2001; Lee, Mitchell, Sabynski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004; Trevor, Hausknecht, & Howard, 2007). Apparently, career transition has attracted increasing attention from both the HRD and HRM research communities and practitioners.

From an organizational perspective, VCTs are viewed as a central management issue (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). It is evidenced by the extensive research on voluntary turnover (e.g. Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, &
Generally speaking, voluntary turnover (VTO) refers to an employee’s voluntary departure from an organization. Undoubtedly, voluntary turnover should be considered a natural part of the voluntary career transition phenomenon.

Managerial VCTs are important to organizations, not only because managers occupy the middle ground of organizational operations, but also because their career success is often an indicator of organizational success (Beddowes, 1994). Managers are major drivers and facilitators of change and adaptation (Beddowes, 1994; Storey, 1989a, 1989b) and are key to organizational performance and renewal (McClelland, 1994). Yet, existing research on managerial VCTs or VTOs has been primarily conducted in Western contexts. Limited, if any, research has been found that has examined managerial VCTs in non-Western contexts such as China (Sullivan, 1999; Sun & Wang, 2009b).

**The Uniqueness of the Chinese Context**

While many regions of the world deserve research attention, the Chinese context offers a unique and useful blend of historical, economic, political, cultural, and social changes that are rare in contemporary societies (Chen, Leung, & Chen, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2006; Zhang & Keh, 2010). Because managerial career transition is rooted in the dynamics of the changing socioeconomic, cultural, and organizational environment, it is necessary to present the unique Chinese context in which managerial career transition takes place.

**The Socioeconomic Context**

During the past three decades, China has experienced a number of fundamental and interrelated socioeconomic transformations (Leung, 2002). First, it has accelerated the process toward urbanization and industrialization. The proportion
of the total population in rural and agricultural areas has been reduced to about 40% in the first decade of the new century from over 80% three decades ago (Cai, 2008).

Second, the economy has transitioned from a rigid and central planning system to a market oriented system. Third, the formerly closely self-sustained nation has not only opened the door to the global market, but is also actively engaged in the globalization process (Cai, 2008; Cai & Lin, 2002; Leung, 2002; Wang, et al., 2009).

As a result of these fundamental transformations, China has assumed an increasingly prominent role in the global economy (Cai & Lin 2003). For almost three decades, China has sustained about 10% annual growth in GDP with its products reaching every corner of the world (Cai, 2008). With its 1.3 billion people representing roughly 20% of world population and its workforce of over 700 million being the largest of any country, the socioeconomic transformations have propelled China to become one of the centers of the world economy. Few countries in the world have experienced such turbulent changes in such a short period of time as China. The nation’s dramatic socioeconomic transformation presents researchers with an exciting intellectual puzzle. Related to the turbulent socioeconomic transformation in the recent decades is the fact that the overall changes have simultaneously altered and redirected the careers of all economically active Chinese working employees.

The Evolving Cultural Context

China’s success in socioeconomic transformation is often associated with its unique cultural context and the underlying values system, such as Confucianism (Luo, 1997). Traditional Confucian values that have been dominant in China for 2,000 years focus on four key aspects. They are: hierarchy and harmony, group orientation, guanxi networks, and mianzi (face).

First, hierarchy and harmony determines the stability of the society. Each
person has a predefined position along a social hierarchy. As long as one behaves according to the social status, social harmony can be achieved (Buttery & Leung, 1998). Second, group orientation shapes interpersonal dynamics. Hofstede (1997) described Chinese culture as highly collective as opposed to Western cultures. This is reflective of Confucian doctrines that emphasize ties of kinship and close personal relationships. Individuals exist for the benefit of the group. Thus, people adopt group goals and opinions in exchange for reciprocal care and protection. The Western concept of individualism is often rejected as selfishness (Fan, 1995).

Third, guanxi networks structure one’s social resources for group or personal career success (Buttery & Leung, 1998). Guanxi can be translated as relationships, connections, or networking. But, it is far more complex than all of them. The word guan literally means door or barrier and a xi means to tie up and extend into relationships. It implies formalization and hierarchy (Luo, 1997). Lastly, the Chinese concept of mianzi (face) is a critical construct of the Chinese cultural orientation (Luo, 1997; Su & Littlefield, 2001). It means giving face and showing respect for one’s social status. To maintain face is to stay trustworthy and to honor obligations in one’s social interactions. It is more important to give face to others than to protect one’s own (Buttery & Leung, 1998). Offering favors to the weaker demonstrates that one has power beyond one’s peers, thus indicating a gain in face or returned respect. Reciprocally, people who have received a favor should return it even if the return may lead to a loss of face (Luo, 1997; Su & Littlefield, 2001).

The complexity of the traditional Chinese culture and its potential impact on individuals’ careers lies in the dynamic interactions of the four aforementioned aspects. The core of the combination is about “being moderate” and “holding the
middle (zhongyong)” dynamically, avoiding imbalance and extremes (Cheng, Wang, & Huang, 2009; Luo, 1997), which is opposite to the more aggressive Western values.

In recent years, it has been observed that traditional Chinese culture has evolved from a mix of dominating Confucianism and communism to more diverse values with emerging capitalism (Wright et al., 2008). Thus, Chinese traditions and Western values co-exist in the contemporary Chinese society and melt into a new Chinese culture that transcends the dualism (Li, 2008). Meanwhile, although Chinese traditional values appear to lose dominance on the surface, they permeate in consciousness and practice (Cheng, et al., 2009). These characteristics of Chinese culture, in contrast with Western cultures, provide a unique context to study career transitions.

**The Organizational Context**

In the organizational arena, the transformation of the nation from a state centrally controlled allocation system to multiple systems comprised of state, collective, and private forms of ownerships has created a unique organizational context that is different from the contexts in which career research has been conducted (Sun & Wang, 2009). This context is represented in the following emerging organizational types with multiple ownership systems (Sun & Wang, 2009b).

**New State-Owned Enterprises (NSOEs).** In 2004, there were approximately 192,000 state-owned enterprises (SOEs), making up 5.9 percent of the total number of enterprises in China. However, in terms of the capital investment, SOEs made up 48.1 percent (State Statistics Bureau, 2005). These enterprises are reformed SOEs operating in key industries such as defense, banking, oil, steel manufacturing, and rail/air transportation, among others. A related system is collectively owned
enterprises, which include organizations engaged in other non-essential industries and are largely owned by various local governments (Cai, 2008). During the earlier years of economic transformation, millions of traditional SOEs, including their collective counterparts, went bankrupt. Consequently, “xiagang”, or “getting off the posts”, was once a popular term describing those who were unemployed as a result. Over decades of reform and restructuring, the remaining SOEs and enterprises in the collective sector have evolved into state-controlled shareholding enterprises. This new type of SOEs, while maintaining some “job security”, is no longer considered an “iron-rice-bowl” although some old-fashioned command management mechanisms still remain.

**Foreign-Owned Enterprises (FOEs).** The establishment of foreign-owned enterprises (FOEs) is a result of China’s open-door policy. Since the beginning of reforms, the state has implemented a series of policies encouraging foreign direct investment in China to take advantage of the low cost of labor. To date, almost all of the world’s top 1,000 corporations have set up operations in China. FOEs bring to China their technologies and management systems, including human resource practices, and compete with native organizations of different ownership systems for market share, human resources, and other resources.

**Joint Ventures (JVs).** These entities are associated with, but different from FOEs. A major difference between the two is that FOEs may not want to transfer their key technologies and management know-how to the Chinese, whereas JVs, by definition, are required to do so. The establishment of JVs have allowed their Chinese partners to immediately benefit from knowledge and technology transfers. They have also created hybrid management systems that may be better suited to “Chinese characteristics.” There were about 78,000 foreign invested companies in China in
2004, including FOEs and JVs, and this number is increasing each year (State Statistics Bureau, 2005).

**Privately-owned Enterprises (POEs).** Historically, the Chinese have had a cultural tradition for entrepreneurship (Wong, 2007). However, from 1949 to the early 1980s, private ownership was strictly forbidden for political reasons. Once such restrictions were lifted in the mid-1980s, China saw an exponential growth of the private sector. Since 1992, POEs have grown at an average annual rate of over 30 percent (State Statistics Bureau, 2005). By the end of 2005, the number of POEs has reached 4.3 million, employing 58.24 million employees (Huan & Hu, 2006). In recent years, POEs have contributed one third of national GDP, and four-fifths of new job creation (Li, 2007). Over the past three decades of development, POEs’ contribution to the economy has surpassed those of SOEs in all measurable aspects, including the number of employees, sales, GDP share, and productivity (Cai & Lin, 2003).

The dramatic transitions in Chinese society as represented by the multiple organizational systems that have emerged have created a variety of challenges for individuals and organizations. Specifically, the differences in HRM and HRD practices and related value orientations among the variant types of organizational systems have created obstacles to career oriented Chinese managers when moving across organizational and system boundaries. Additionally, organizations are encountering more challenges in developing and retaining competent management talent given the competition for talent within and across these varied organizational systems (Sun & Wang, 2009b).
The Traditional Career Context

In contrast to the century-long tradition of research and practice in career development in Western societies, China has had no equivalent tradition in its history until very recently. Although some initial efforts in vocational guidance can be traced back to the early 1900s (Liu, 2000), career development research and practice are at a formative stage because of China’s historical and political evolution.

In traditional communist ideology before mid-1970s, a career was defined by the state as an individual’s contribution to communism and its social course. In the traditional communism system, state allocation was the only mechanism for job assignment. Rarely was there any individual choice involved in making a career decision (Sun & Wang, 2009b). The job allocation system was strictly enforced not only for high school and college graduates, but also for retired military officers and all non-agricultural occupations (Cai, 2008). Once individuals were employed, they were guaranteed an “iron-rice-bowl” for a lifetime, and often with low job satisfaction (Leung, 2002; Sun & Wang, 2009b). “State-owned” entities were essentially the only type of organization in China. Promotion and career growth largely depended on individuals’ political loyalty and association, seniority, personal or family connections, and other subjective standards set by the Communist Party (Li & Wright, 2000). Consequently, the traditional Chinese system ruled out individuals’ motivation for exploring career development and restricted their career transition potential.

Statement of the Problem

Few would argue that much of management knowledge today is the outcome of scholarly work by scholars in North America, especially the United States, and those in Western Europe (Starbuck, 2002). Lau (2002) has acknowledged that a
majority of the body of knowledge in management today has been conducted by Western scholars with much of the work addressing “mostly the U.S. or European issues” (p. 4). Related knowledge from non-Western contexts has been an insignificant part of the global knowledge base, implying there is much room for theory building research in non-Western contexts to contribute to global management knowledge (Tsui, 2004). The same holds true for existing theoretical and empirical research on career transition (Sullivan, 1999; Sun & Wang, 2009b).

Career development has been studied extensively in the Western literature for almost a century. Research on career transition has also been reported in the literature since the 1960s (e.g. Glaser, 1968a; Etzioni, 1968). Numerous theories and models have been proposed for understanding and predicting the career transition phenomenon in the Western contexts (Hilton, 1962; Louis, 1980; Trevor, 2007). While the existing theories under the Western contexts may be informative to the understanding of the career transition phenomenon currently witnessed by China, they offer limited insight on explaining career transition behaviors shaped by the aforementioned Chinese context. This is because theories proposed in the West were based on explicit or implicit assumptions embedded in Western contexts confined by certain boundary conditions, “historical roots”, and “contemporary treatment” (Whetten, 2009; p. 46). Context is defined as comprising of a unique material system and a unique ideational system (Child, 2009). Differences in context can change the meaning of theoretical constructs and the relationships among them (Child, 2009). In particular, the problems and inadequacy of Western-based theories when applied to the Chinese context can be identified in the following areas.

First, different cultural norms and values determine different dynamics among organizations and individuals, resulting in different behaviors and motivational
preferences that are specific to the corresponding cultural context. Individuals have been found to react differently in terms of cooperation, conflict, or perception of fairness depending on the dominant cultural value or economic ideology of the societies (Chen, 1995; Kelley, Whatley and Worthley, 1987; Ralston, Holt, Terpstra, & Cheng, 1997).

Specifically, Earley (1993) found that Chinese managers with a collectivistic value performed more poorly alone or in an out-group than when they were in an in-group. U.S. managers, on the other hand, performed more poorly working in an in-group than in an out-group or alone. This suggests that cultural values moderate the relationship between performance and group membership. Likewise, a “consideration behavior” performed by a leader in the U.S. (e.g., taking an employee to lunch) may be an organizational obligation in China. Visiting a sick supervisor is expected of employees (as sign of loyalty) in China, but is not at all expected in the West. Further, team interactions such as treating everyone the same way is considered to be fair in a collectivistic culture, but is unfair in an individualistic culture. The underlying cultural assumption of the collectivistic context is that any outcome is the fruit of the group to which the individual belongs. No one member can take sole credit for any outcome, even if the outcome was the result by a single individual (Tsui, 2006).

Similarly, it is well known that Chinese are more loyal to individuals than to a system or organization (e.g. Redding & Hsiao, 1990). In spite of its recent effort to build up its legal infrastructure, China remains a society characterized by rule of man more than rule of law (Chen & Francesco, 2000; Walder, 1991). In contrast, employee commitment to the organization is less direct, salient and intense in motivating employee behavior (Chen, Tsui, & Farh, 2002). Studies have found that reward
allocation preferences between U.S. and Chinese employees are fundamentally different (e.g., Chen, 1995).

Second, the transitioning context induced by the aforementioned socioeconomic changes combined with traditional Chinese culture has created new intellectual puzzles in organizations and related human resource functions that require adequate theoretical explanation. For instance, Meyer and Lu (2005) reported a Chinese company’s structure that would surprise any executive of a Western company. They wrote, “In the case of China, incomplete separation of firms from the state, incomplete integration of firms and partial listing of assets have left most Chinese firms with indefinite boundaries” (p. 57). Yu (2004) also documented an observed HR function through the eyes of a Western HR executive: “I totally changed my mind about human resources after collaborating with a Chinese company. Its HR department is still quite primitive. … but most surprisingly, employees demonstrate high levels of citizenship behavior. Up to now, I still have no idea why this company operates HR management like that (p.121).”

Apparently, these and other related HRD/HRM phenomena cannot be understood under existing theoretical frameworks developed in the Western context. This further suggests that, empirically, China provides a unique context for understanding the career transition phenomenon along with other associated management challenges. In light of China’s growing importance on the world stage, it is essential to theoretically explore how managerial career transitions in China adapt to its rapidly changing, complex, and turbulent conditions (Sun & Wang, 2009b; Tsui, 2004, 2006).

Third, while extending and validating Western-based theories in the Chinese context have been a popular approach to studying career development and other
management phenomena in recent years, research has often produced inconsistent or even erroneous results due to contextual differences. For instance, while some Western scholars have noticed that cultural context matters in the leadership literature, they often are unfamiliar with or even misunderstand non-Western cultural concepts (Yukl, 1998). Bass and Stogdill (1990) mentioned, in their well-circulated *Handbook of Leadership*, that one of the impacts of Confucianism on Chinese leadership is its emphasis on impartial use of reward and punishment. However, this emphasis actually originated from Legalism (Peng, Chen, & Yang, 2008) rather than Confucianism.

Moreover, in validating Western career theories, Tu, Forest, and Sullivan’s (2006) found inconsistent results of career success factors reported in the Western literature among Chinese managers. In exploring Chinese managers’ career choice and related factors, Gao and Zhang (2009) were also unable to confirm some of the important relationships among the variables as reported in the Western literature (e.g., Van-Vianen & Annelies, 1999). Additionally, Western-based “strength-of-weak-ties” hypothesis states that in a job search process, individuals are matched to jobs more frequently and more effectively through weak ties than strong ties (DeGraaf & Flap 1988; Granovetter, 1973, 1974; Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981). The testing of the same hypothesis in China (Bian, 1997) found that strong ties rather than weak ties were associated more with a successful job search.

Literature has highlighted the importance of understanding the contextual differences, especially when interpreting, validating, or extending existing Western theories across national borders. It suggests that career transition related theories developed in the West may not be generalized to individuals and organizations in non-Western contexts (Sullivan, 1999; Wong, 2007). For this purpose, management
scholars have repeatedly called for conducting indigenous and inductive research and 
exploring theoretical understanding of unique organizational phenomena in the 
Chinese context (e.g., Barney & Zhang, 2009; Child, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2006, 2009). 

Furthermore, career transitions in China, as a recent phenomenon, are coupled 
with the drastic socioeconomic changes. An explanation of large-scale career 
transition in China is that organizations in different ownership systems adopt different 
management, human resources practices with different organization cultures that 
affect individuals’ careers (Sun & Wang, 2009b). This creates unparalleled 
opportunities for managers to explore their career options. 

According to a recent report by a Chinese human resource consulting firm, in 
2007, the magnitude of voluntary job change rates in China was phenomenal for 
managers in all industries in recent years. In 2006 and 2007, the job turnover rate was 
28.3% for middle managers in the financial industry; the rate for senior executives 
was 12.6%. In the high-tech industry, an average of 25% of managers changed their 
jobs during the same period (51job.com, 2007). Similarly, troubled by the high job 
turnover rate among managers, multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in China 
have been engaged in a constant pursuit of “looking for a few good managers” in light 
of their ongoing localization strategies (Boston Consulting Group & Wharton School, 
2004). 

Yet, existing conceptual and empirical understanding of the career 
phenomenon has been overly focused on the antecedents of career change or turnover 
and has overlooked the overall process of career transition and its significance in 
retaining and developing managers (Egan, 2005; Lee & Mitchell, 1999). Insufficient 
studies have explored the interactions between organizations and individuals during 
the career transition process even in the Western contexts. Due to its organizational
focus, the concept of voluntary turnover (VTO) in the management literature often conveys a negative connotation (e.g., Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Because the departure of an employee from an organization is considered a loss of human capital to the departing organization, management scholars have been engaged in extensive research to help organizations avoid this “bad” phenomenon since the 1950s (e.g. Abelson, 1987; Breeden, 1993; Cohen, 1991,1993; Gupta, Guimaraes, & Raghunathan, 1992; Guthrie, 2001; Igbaria, Greenhous, & Parasuraman, 1991; March & Simon, 1958; Lee, Wise, & Fireman, 1996; Schyns, Torka, & Gossling, 2007).

Research on the new concepts of protean and boundaryless careers has also remained at a conceptual level (Hall, 1996, 2002). Few empirical studies, if any, have been developed to examine the changing nature of new careers even in the Western literature, not to mention theories with indigenous features to understand careers in the Chinese context (Sun & Wang, 2009b). Consequently, rapid economic development in China and the associated massive career transition phenomenon presents a new challenge to the research community on how to theoretically understand and interpret the phenomenon.

In summary, career transition is an important domain of research critical to HRD/HRM research and practice. The broad literature on career development and career transition in the Western world over the years, while informative, offers insufficient and inadequate explanation when applied to the career transition phenomenon in the Chinese context. The managerial career transition phenomenon rooted in the dramatic socioeconomic changes in China presents a unique and exciting research opportunity to explore the process of voluntary career transition. Yet, little indigenous research has been conducted to derive theoretical understanding of the career transition phenomenon in the Chinese context. A compelling need exists for
indigenous and explorative research to investigate the voluntary career transition phenomenon and contributing to the broad knowledge base of HRD/HRM (Barney, et al, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2006; Whetten, 2009).

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate Chinese managers’ voluntary career transitions (VCTs) in the contemporary Chinese organizational and socioeconomic context. Specifically, the following research questions will guide this study:

1. What is the career transition process experienced by Chinese managers who have made voluntary career transitions?
2. What are the major determinants of voluntary career transitions experienced by Chinese managers?
3. What are the outcomes of voluntary career transitions experienced by Chinese managers?

**Overview of Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research paradigm with the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Glaser, 1978, 1992). It is well accepted that a grounded theory approach is appropriate when phenomena are ill-defined and when existing theory cannot provide convincing and adequate answers to the research problem of interest (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lee, 1999). A grounded theory approach is a necessary step in developing a conceptual understanding that captures the richness of a local context. Once an inductively and indigenously developed model is confirmed, refined, or elaborated through deductive testing, one can compare knowledge...
generated in that context with knowledge on similar phenomena described in the existing literature. Due to the relatively new phenomenon of career transition among Chinese managers and the context presented earlier, a grounded theory approach is deemed the most appropriate approach to examining voluntary career transition.

Semi-structured interviews and field observations were the primary techniques used to obtain the data needed for the study. Beijing was chosen as the research setting. As the capital city of China, Beijing is one of the most revitalized cities in China. I was able to collect rich data on the career transition phenomenon from selected managers. A purposeful sampling selection strategy was used to identity a group of Chinese managers. These managers were invited to share their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and attitudes about their most recent career transition experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data collection was primarily guided by the theoretical sampling process described in Glaser (1978, 1992). This strategy requires that subsequent data collection be guided by the data collected and through comparative analysis.

A pilot study to test and refine the interview protocol and to preview the data gathered by the interviews was conducted as part of my doctoral program of study in a qualitative research class. The interview protocol was subsequently revised based on the results of the pilot study. All interview data has been recorded and transcribed in Chinese.

According to the grounded theory method, data analysis and theoretical sampling were conducted simultaneously, so that the subsequent data collection was guided by the previous data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Specifically, substantive coding and theoretical coding were adopted for data analysis according to the recommendation by Glaser (1978, 1992). Constant
comparison between data and data, incident and incident, theory and data, was employed as a critical analytical method associated with coding procedures in order to discover a theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

All twenty-two interviews have been conducted and thoroughly analyzed. The data collection and analysis have followed the approved dissertation design, as documented in Appendices A through G. These include IRB approval, the interview guide, the observation protocol, the participants’ demographics, a sample of the data, and a sample of the data analysis.

**Significance of the Study**

This study offers a number of contributions to research, theory, and practice in HRD and HRM. The scholarly literature has shown that economic and societal changes inevitably instigate large scale career transitions at both organizational and individual levels. As career transitions and changes becomes a salient part of individual’s work experiences, the study of career transition becomes more central to understanding how individuals’ careers unfold. (Ng, et al, 2007)

Empirical observations have indicated that a massive career transition is currently taking place in China (51job Report, 2007; Sun & Wang, 2009b). Given its importance in the world economy and the turbulent changes at all levels, China offers a solid setting for extending career transition research. The career transition phenomenon resulting from China’s socioeconomic transformations presents tremendous opportunities for scholars to conduct research in this area. Because of the limited research on managerial career transition in China, the findings of the study have potential to contribute to Chinese HRD/HRM research by providing an indigenous theoretical understanding of the voluntary career transition phenomenon.
Furthermore, this study contributes to both HRD and HRM research literature by examining the career transition phenomenon combining the accumulated knowledge in VCT and VTO. Existing career transition literature has provided limited understanding on the career transition process even in the Western context. Additionally, research on VCT and VTO has traditionally been conducted separately in the Western literature. This study is among the first to combine the disparate bodies of literature to explore the entire career transition process. It is likely to uncover new features and properties about the nature of VCT from a different angle. Consolidating career transition behavior and voluntary turnover, this study also made a unique contribution to the overall career development and career transition literature specifically, by unfolding the career transition process and the interactions between individual attributes and organizational context.

This study contributes to theory building in HRD and HRM research through a context specific inquiry. Exploring a popular phenomenon of career transition with an inductive approach to the less studied context of China, this study has generated novel theoretical understanding and contributes to career development research. The resulting context sensitive theory from this study is likely to refine and improve existing career theory. For example, although literature has suggested new protean and boundaryless career patterns, the research has remained at a conceptual level since its inception (Hall, 1996, 2002). Few theoretical frameworks, if any, have been developed to explain the empirical observations. The derived context specific theory provides new insight in understanding of the new career patterns and contributes to HRD/HRM theory building efforts.

This study also has implications for HRD/HRM practice. As nonlinear, discontinuous, and boundaryless careers become more common (Arthur & Rousseau,
understanding the variety of strategies available to managers to develop their careers across organizational boundaries and the conditions under which the transition is more or less beneficial to both organizations and individuals is an important and timely concern. It may inform organizations to manage VCTs effectively and to promote institutional structures and environments that attract, develop, and retain managerial talent. From an individual’s perspective, the findings from this research with indigenous knowledge may also help guide Chinese managers to proactively develop their careers.

Definitions

To avoid confusion and maintain consistency in the study, it is necessary to define the following key terms and clarify their relationships in accordance with their use in this study as depicted in Figure 1.

Manager: An individual who is in charge of a certain group of tasks, or a certain subset of an organization, with a staff of people reporting to him/her (Asllani & Luthans, 2003).

Career transition: A process of changing jobs or professions (extrinsic career). It is often accompanied by changes in one’s orientation to work while continuing in the same position or job (intrinsic career) (Louis, 1980).

**Inter-organizational career transition:** A type of career transition characterized by moving from one organization to another (Louis, 1980; Trevor, et al, 2007).

**Voluntary Turnover:** An employee initiated departure from an organization (Lee, et al, 1994, 1996).

**Job Mobility:** An aggregated pattern of intra- and inter-organizational career transitions (Hall, 1996; Sullivan, 1999; Ng. et al, 2007).

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships among the terms defined above and facilitates a conceptual understanding of these key concepts.

![Figure 1. Relationships of the Concepts](image)

As indicated in Figure 1, career transition covers all types of career changing experiences including physical job changes and the intrinsic shift of orientation to the same job. Job mobility concerns physical movement from one position to another, including the frequency of such movement, within or between organizations.
Inter-organizational career transition refers to job changes across organizational boundaries (both extrinsic and intrinsic).

Inter-organizational career transition and job mobility can be voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary turnover captures the departing portion of a voluntary career transition. Also, voluntary career transition refers to career changes from one organization to another. Therefore, it naturally includes voluntary turnovers. The focus of this study is the voluntary career transition that crosses organizational boundaries, as represented in the shaded area in Figure 1.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the context in which this study was conducted. The research problem has been discussed and the research purpose and research questions have been addressed. The key concepts have been defined and the research method employed in the study is briefly described. Finally, this chapter addressed the significance of the study to research and practice.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews, analyzes, and critiques the literature in career transition related research in career development, human resource management (HRM), human resource development (HRD), and other related disciplines. The purpose of this multidisciplinary review is to identify research gaps and lay the groundwork for the study.

Introduction

This review of literature examines six themes of literatures relevant to studying the career transition phenomenon and is organized into five sections. The first section reviews twelve core career development theories that have important implication to the understanding of career transitions. The second section reviews career transition specific theories and models that attempt to explain career transitions from both macro and micro level. Empirical studies on career transitions in the sociology, management, psychological and HRD/HRM literatures are reviewed in the third section. The fourth section reviews available literature in relation to managerial career transition and career development. The last section summarizes the review and points out the research gaps identified through the literature review.
The following major databases, in conjunction with *Google Scholar*, were used to search for relevant research sources to conduct the review of literature. They included ABI/INFORM Complete at ProQuest, EBESCO, PsychInfo, Academic Search Premier, Business Search Premier, and JSTOR. Two major Chinese databases were also searched to include literature published in the Chinese language. They were National Science and Technology Library (NSTL), the largest virtual library with a joint library database in China, and Wangfang Data, a commercial database covering all social science literatures in both English and Chinese. Additionally, Amazon.com was used to identify book sources. The following search terms, in either English or Chinese language, were used either alone or in varied combinations to generate as many sources of literature as possible: *career development, career transition, voluntary career transition, voluntary turnover, job mobility, job changes, managerial career,*, and *management career*. The comprehensive search resulted in about 1820 publications in the fields of HRD/HRM, general management, psychology, and sociology published as journal articles, research reports, books, and doctoral dissertations.

**Core Career Development Theories**

Career development research covers a large body of knowledge in psychology, sociology, human development, human resource development and human resource management research (Sun & Wang, 2009a). Because career transition is a primary type of career decision in one’s career life (Brown, 1995; Hall, 2002; Louis, 1980), it is necessary to review the existing career decision making theories in terms of major factors as well as the decision making process (Sun & Wang, 2009a). This section
reviews and identifies twelve major career decision making-related career development theories and relates the theories to the concept of career transition.

In general, career decision theories can be classified into three categories. They are variable-oriented theories, developmental theories, and process-oriented theories (Sun & Wang, 2009a).

**Variable-oriented Theories**

The following five dominant career development theories are focused on individual intrinsic variables or attributes that influence career decision making. Three intrinsic variable oriented theories have been influential in the last century in explaining or predicting career decision making behavior. They are personality types theory (Holland, 1959), needs based theory (Roe, 1956), and value based theory (Brown, 1995). Many prevailing career counseling techniques and career development interventions have been developed based on the understanding of these intrinsic personal attributes and characteristics.

**Intrinsic variable oriented career development theories.** This group of theories can be traced back to Parsons’ (1909) trait-factor theory, one of the earliest career development theories. Parsons assumed that a match could be made between an individual and the world of work based on the characteristics of the person and the identified need of the job or career context. Holland (1959, 1985) further developed a personality oriented career development theory based on Parsons’ basic job-person matching assumption. This model, Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional (RIASEC), identified six specific personality and interest types and work environment combinations to explain the relationship between job-personality matching and career satisfactions (Holland, 1959). In addition to the two personality-based theories, the two following theories are used to explain decision
making mechanisms based on personal needs reduction and personal value satisfaction.

Needs based theory emphasizes the importance of early experiences, particularly in family life, that influence the definition of, and satisfaction with, selected careers (Roe, 1956). This theory explores the relationship between parental decision making and choices that lead to the later adult lifestyles chosen by the child. This theory divides occupations into two major areas: person oriented and non-person oriented. It links the two areas to family-related experiences. Although the needs-based theory can explain part of the underlying motivation and rationality of an individual’s career decision making, it is only loosely related to the decision making process.

A second theory was proposed by Brown (1995), emphasizing personal values as one of the most important factors in career decision making. According to this theory, personal values are identified as a major motivation to explain individuals’ career transition. Values are core beliefs that are standards against which individuals can judge their daily performance and that of others (Rokeach, 1973). Brown stated that people made decisions on whether to move from their current jobs because they hoped to secure an occupation that would satisfy their values. He further posited that for a job to be satisfying, it must allow individuals to engage in activities that they believe to be worthwhile, which in turn allows them to compare themselves favorably with others. Further, Brown described the decision making process as crystallizing values and ranking them accordingly. This simple ranking of values appears insufficient to represent the complex thinking process of career decision making. However, value oriented theory captures an important underlying motivation for career decision making.
The simplest form of intrinsic variable oriented career decision theories is that individuals first take an inventory of their personal attributes, including interests, personality, traits, values and needs. They then ascertain the attributes required for successful adjustment in each interested occupation. Finally, they select an occupation by which the requirements best match their attributes. This school of career development theory essentially takes personal attributes as a set of stable variables and assumes that career decisions mainly deal with matching an individual’s internal attributes and the external environment.

There are two limitations in applying the intrinsic variable oriented theories to career decision making. First, they overlook the dynamic nature of a person’s potential, interests, and abilities. Individuals develop these attributes as they mature. Second, subjective attributes alone, such as interest or personality, cannot completely explain career decision making (Sun & Wang, 2009a). For example, a person may have an interest or ability to teach, but he/she may not be interested in becoming a teacher when a career decision is made.

**Extrinsic variable oriented career development theories.** Social systems theory emphasizes extrinsic variables on career decision making. It states that an individual’s control over the impact of events and societal circumstances is limited and that transactions between social systems and individuals contribute considerably to career development (Caplow, 1954). The primary undertaking confronting individuals is the development of knowledge and skills to cope effectively with the environment. However, the extent to which social structure influences individual career development and career outcomes remains contested (Kingston, 2000). This theory is in line with social network theory because it focuses on extrinsic variables
such as social environment and their influence on an individual’s career decision making.

Each aforementioned variable oriented career development theory has distinctive features. However, they share the notion that career decisions are determined by an individual’s intrinsic attributes and/or transactions occurring between persons and their external environments (Osipow, 1990).

**Developmental Theories**

In addition to variable oriented theories, there are four career development theories that have influenced our understanding of career decision making. They are: (1) Self-concept theories (Super, 1963; Ginzberg, 1952), (2) General developmental theories (Ginzberg, 1951, 1966), (3) Social learning theory of career choice (Krumboltz, 1994), and (4) Life span theory (Super, 1957, 1980). Compared to variable oriented career development theories, developmental theories emphasize that an individual’s career decision is a result of self-development and learning processes instead of merely the function of personal traits and external variables.

The core assumptions of self-concept theories include the following: (a) individuals’ self-concepts are influenced by maturity and evolve along with their perceptions of reality as they grow; (b) individuals make career decisions by comparing their images of the world of work with their self-images; and (c) the adequacy of career decisions for individuals is based on the similarity between self-concept and the career roles that are focused on (Ginzberg, 1952; Osipow, 1990; Super, 1963). The self-concept approach allows for the influence of factors that are marginal to awareness by assuming a kind of projection of the self in total imagination into the occupational role as perceived by the individual. In contrast to the traditional test oriented approach, self-concept theory follows a less rational
decision making process, but incorporates emotional and unconscious elements. However, it has been criticized as impractical because both self-concept and occupational role perceptions are essentially subjective and are not accessible to standardized measurement instruments (Morrison, 1962).

General developmental theory of occupational choice proposes that career decision making is a process that takes place over a period of at least six or seven years with several decision stages, including fantasy, tentative, and realistic choices (Ginzberg, et al., 1951, 1966). This process is a developmental process in which past behavior imposes a major influence upon present and future decisions. Second, since each decision is related to a person’s experiences up to that point, which in turn have an influence on the future, the process of decision making is irreversible. Finally, the crystallization of occupational choice inevitably has the quality of a compromise (Ginzberg, et al., 1951, 1966). This developmental theory mainly focuses on the influence of individual’s development on career decision making.

Krumboltz’s social learning theory of career choice (1994) suggests that individuals make career choices based on what they have learned and what particular behaviors are modeled, rewarded, and reinforced. Individuals choose careers as an outcome of internalized social learning. Therefore, a career decision is a result of multiple learning experiences through interactions with available persons, organizations, and experiences. Key learning experiences direct individuals toward the formation of beliefs about the nature of careers and their prospective life roles based on generalized self-observations. Positive modeling, rewards, and reinforcement are likely to lead to the development of appropriate career-planning skills and career behaviors such as execution of career choices.
Super’s life span theory (1980) assumes life patterns are made up of different life roles. These roles shift from time to time based on different life stages. It takes career decision making as the outcome of career maturity associated with individual’s age and stage development throughout the life span. Super (1957, 1980) believes that specific career decision making is always associated with adopting a new life role, dropping an old role, or significantly changing the nature of an existing life role.

If we consider social system theory taking social environment as a dominant determinant to influence career decision making, then social learning theory and developmental theory go a step further and posit that external factors and past experiences can influence individual’s decision making through learning and interaction between the individual and the environment. Without an internal motivation or reflection, the social environment may not be able to influence the decision making process as much. Meanwhile, self-conception theory and life span theory take the individual growth path, life stages, and maturity as preconditions for career related decision making.

In short, the developmental theories suggest career decision making is a result of a process developed during an individual’s growth. This group of theories captures an important attribute of career decision making as the result of individuals’ learning and growth. However, they are not effective in describing a career decision making process because it is difficult to define the beginning and the terminal points of one’s particular career decisions according to developmental theories (Sun & Wang, 2009a).

**Process Oriented Theories**

Process oriented theories not only identify variables that influence career decision making, but also provide models to describe a career decision process. They include, (1) cognitive information processing theories, (Sampson, Lenz, Reardon, &
Peterson, 1999), (2) career decision making theories (Herr & Cramer, 1988), and (3) social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994).

The cognitive information processing (CIP) theory by Sampson, et al. (1999) is about the thought and memory processes involved in making career decisions. It frames career decision making as a set of problem-solving activities. A general problem-solving process (CASVE) is used as the main information process to make career decisions, including: (1) communication, (2) analysis, (3) synthesis, (4) valuing, and (5) execution (Wodtsh, 1977). Cognitive and knowledge abilities are identified as two major elements influencing the degree to which individuals take control over their careers and making career decisions.

Similarly, career decision making (CDM) theory is based on the notion that individuals are able to choose from a variety of career options. According to the CDM theory, career decision events often include (a) problem definition, (b) generation of scenarios of alternatives, (c) information gathering, (d) information processing, (e) making plans, (f) goal clarification, and (g) taking action (Herr & Cramer, 1988). This theory emphasizes critical life points when actions taken have significant influence on career development. CDM theory believes that choices are influenced by awareness of available options and abilities to evaluate what is presented (Pietrofesa & Splete, 1975). It is an example of traditional normative career theories.

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) is derived from Bandura’s (1986) general social cognitive theory (Lent, et al., 1994, 2002). Emphasizing the interplay between self-referent thought and social processes in guiding human behavior, SSCT is based on three key theoretical constructs. They are (1) self-efficacy, (2) outcome expectations, and (3) personal goals. These three constructs are basic building blocks and represent key mechanisms by which people are able to exercise personal agency.
(Lent, et al., 1994, 2002). SCCT is distinct from yet complements Holland’s theory. It highlights personal goals as an important intermediate link between interests and actions. It also identifies self-efficacy and outcome expectations as factors that shape individuals’ interest patterns and as co-determinants of choice. Finally, it emphasizes the influence of the personal situation such as predispositions, gender, race, disability, and background as contextual affordances to career decision making.

**Summary of Core Career Development Theories**

The twelve aforementioned theories explain career decision making from different perspectives with different emphases. There are similar variables found across these theories. Twenty seven variables have emerged from these theories and they are categorized into three groups: intrinsic, extrinsic, and process variables.

Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Theories</th>
<th>Assumptions or Propositions</th>
<th>Variables</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive information processing theory (Sampson, Lenz, Reardon, &amp; Peterson, 1998)</td>
<td>Career problem solving and decision making involve the interaction of both affective and cognitive processes. 2 the capability for career problem solving depends on the availability of cognitive operations as well as knowledge</td>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
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<td>execution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997; Lent, et al., 1994)</td>
<td>Career decision making and career development are based on the interplay between self-referent thought and social processes in guiding behavior</td>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
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<td>outcome expectation</td>
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<td>personal goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career Decision Making theories (Herr &amp; Cramer, 1988)</td>
<td>Individuals are able to make choices from a variety of career options.</td>
<td>Career options</td>
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<td>Ability to evaluate available options</td>
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<th>Theories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personality Oriented or/and Trait Factor theories (Parsons, 1909; Holland, 1959)</td>
<td>Workers select their jobs and work environment because they see potential for the satisfaction of their needs. Worker needs are seen to connect largely to personality dimensions.</td>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
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<td>(a) individuals refine self-concepts as they grow older; however self-concepts are influenced by aging and evolve along with individual perceptions of reality; (b) individuals make decisions by comparing their images of the world of work with their self-images. (c) the adequacy of career decisions for individuals are based on the similarity between self-concept and the career roles</td>
<td>Self-image/self-concept Career- models</td>
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<td>Social Systems Theory (Caplow, 1954)</td>
<td>Individual control over the impart of events and societal circumstances is limited. Transactions between social systems and individuals contribute considerably to career decision making</td>
<td>Societal circumstances</td>
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<td>Values-based theory (Brown, 1995)</td>
<td>Individuals select a career to secure satisfying their values.</td>
<td>Cognitive domain of value</td>
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<td>Individuals career decision making process is unknown up to date</td>
<td>Crystallization of value</td>
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<td>Individuals early experience, especially their family related experiences influence their definition and satisfaction of their careers they choose when they grow up</td>
<td>Prioritization of value</td>
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<td>Needs-based Theory (Roe, 1956, 1972)</td>
<td>Individuals plays a variety of roles as they mature. Decision points occur before or at the time of taking a new role/giving up an old role/change the nature of a current role.</td>
<td>Early experience</td>
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<td>Career decision is the outcome of internalized learning responses to environmental conditions, learning experience and genetics.</td>
<td>Needs fulfillment and limitations</td>
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<td>Person-oriented occupations</td>
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<td>Genetics</td>
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</table>
Intrinsic variables represent internal factors that may influence individuals’ career decision making. These include (1) self-knowledge, (2) self-efficacy, (3) expectation, (4) personal goals, (5) personalities, (6) self-concept/self-image, (7) personal value system, (8) needs, (9) abilities, and (10) genetics. External variables influencing career decision making include: (1) general occupational information, (2) career options, (3) working environment, (4) key persons, (5) key events or critical incidents (6) career models, (7) life roles, (8) theaters, (9) positions and (10) societal circumstances. Process components include (1) time, (2) communication (3) analysis (4) synthesis, (5) execution, (6) observation, and (7) modeling. Apparently, the mainstream of career development theories is related to an individual’s perspective (Egan, 2006).

**How Career Development Theories Inform Career Transition Research**

In general, the theories referenced in Table 1 consider career transition an essential component of career development and career decision making. Some specific dimensions of the variables in the table are highlighted to explain the career transition phenomena. For example, Brown (1995) discussed the importance of the leader-member relationship from a values based approach to explain career transition. He maintained that “workers whose values are at variance with those of their supervisors are likely to have differing views of the relative importance of various aspects of the job” (p. 4). This may lead to a value conflict between the employee and the supervisor and therefore induce planned or unplanned career transitions.

Developmental theories are also frequently used to explain career transitions occurring at different life or career stages of an individual. According to developmental theories, career transitions occur when individuals develop a self-concept and career maturity, and learn to fit into their new roles or switch their
emphases in the existing roles (Ginzberg, 1951; Super, 1957, 1963). This group of theories is frequently used to explain job changes in the early life stages (Louis, 1980).

Process oriented career development theories (e.g., CCCT, CIP and CDM theory), in contrast, inform career transition research with the general cognitive process of decision making. But none of them have specifically focused on the decision making process of career transition. Consequently, the traditional career theories have been criticized as being insufficient to explain the current career transition phenomenon (Sullivan, 1999, Cohen, Duberley, & Mallon, 2004). For instance, Chen (2003) noted that considering the increased frequency of career transition in the job market, attribute-matching theories (Super, 1957) or need reduction theories (Roe, 1956) may not be appropriate to either explain or guide career transition practice in the temporal social context (Chen, 2003).

Recently, a number of studies have divided career theories into two categories named as “established theories” and “emerging theories” (Brown & Brooks, 1996; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2002; Zunker, 2002). The distinction between the two is based on two major schools of thinking, “objectivist” and “constructivist” approaches, respectively (Savickas, 2000). Traditional theories regard a career as linear, hierarchical, and rigid, and are based primarily on objectivist (or positivist) beliefs. The emerging theories, in contrast, are derived from a social constructivist ideology which has been regarded as a second perspective on career research in viewing career development as a complex, dynamic and ever-evolving concept (Chen, 2003; Savichas, 1992). This allows for an understanding of career transition in a meaningful context, in terms of both the temporal context (the sequence of events prior to the
transition) and the social context (the significant events and individuals influencing the change) (Wise & Millward, 2005).

Methodologically, both traditional positivistic and emerging constructivist paradigms have contributed towards our understanding of contemporary careers (Chen, 2003; Cohen et al, 2004; Kidd, 2004). It appears beneficial to transcend these delineations to embrace a more integrated perspective on career transitions.

**Career Transition Specific Theories and Models**

An early model to explain career transition was offered by Hilton (1962). Recognizing career transitions are often caused by dissatisfaction, this model posited that dissatisfaction comes from a lack of congruence between the individuals’ work orientations and the rewards of their occupations. Work orientations were defined as “how workers order their wants and expectations relative to their employment” (Russell, 1975, p. 304). These wants and expectations reflect a person’s needs and values. Therefore, individuals’ needs and values lead them to career transitions for reducing their dissatisfaction in the current career. This model has confirmed a relationship between work dissatisfaction and a lack of congruence between individuals’ needs, values, or work orientations and their occupations (Schaffer, 1953; Wofford, 1971; Russell, 1975; Kalleberg, 1977). It was also in agreement with Schein’s (1975) framework on the relationship between career stability and congruence between individuals’ needs and occupation. However, Hilton’s (1962) model is deemed to represent only the concerns and major factors for career change in the traditional sense, but not valid in explaining contemporary career transitions in the new types of career such as the boundaryless career and protean career (Lee & Maurer, 1997).
While most career transition theories have been from an individual’s perspective, some sociologists, from a macro-level, have seen career transition or job mobility as being socially driven, such as vacancy-driven (Diprete, De Graaf, Luijkx, Tahlin, & Blossfeld, 1997; Fujiwara-Greve & Greve, 2000). According to these studies, four major groups of structural factors could induce individuals’ career transitions. They are economic conditions, societal characteristics, industry differences, and organizations’ staffing policies (Ng, et al, 2007).

In the management literature, an obvious trend related to career transition is that scholars are focused more on voluntary turnover (VTO) research (e.g. Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980). For example, March and Simon (1958) were among the first who identified the main antecedents of employee turnover. They proposed that employee turnover results from the individual’s perceptions about the desirability and ease of movement (March & Simon, 1958). Later, others equated the perceived desirability of movement essentially with another construct, job satisfaction (Jackofsky & Peters, 1983), and the ease of movement was equated with the number of perceived job alternatives. These two constructs have served as the theoretical underpinning for much of earlier management literature on voluntary turnover research (Hulin, Roznowski, & Hachiya., 1985).

With major antecedents identified, Mobley (1977) conceptualized a seven-step turnover model starting from dissatisfaction and ending with eventual turnover. The middle process included job alternatives, expected utility, cost of searching for alternatives, and comparison of the alternatives. A major conceptual advancement of this model was later made by Hulin and his colleagues (1985) where they combined
labor markets, job alternatives, inertia, luck, job attitudes, and differing foci to explain
turnover.

Due to the fact that the two models above were only able to explain a modest
proportion of variance in actual employee voluntary turnover, Lee and Mitchell
(1994), drawing from the image theory of general decision making model, presented
an unfolding model of VTO. This model, combined with some psychological
mechanisms such as habits, scripts, and schemas, identified five unique decision paths
leading to employees’ turnover. Based on this model, Lee and Mitchell posit that
turnover decisions are not always the result of accumulated job dissatisfaction and
may sometimes occur without much deliberation at all.

Another commonly used approach to conceptualize the career transition
phenomena in the management literature has been typology. Since the early 1980s,
management scholars and career theorists have made a series of efforts to typologize
the complex phenomena into different categories. Louis (1980) proposed one of the
first U.S.-based career transition typological models addressing both intrinsic and
extrinsic perspectives during individuals’ career transitions. This model classified
career transition into two categories, consisting of nine different types. The two
categories include inter-role transitions and intra-role transitions as presented in
Figure 2.
Inter-role transitions include the following types: (1) Entry/Reentry transition: (Re)entering a certain career path; (2) Intra-company transition: taking a different role in the same organization.; (3) Inter-company transition: moving from one organization to another; (4) Inter-profession transition: Changing profession or working function; and (5) Exit: leaving a career path, including voluntary or involuntary unemployment, temporary leave from an industry, etc. The category of intra-role transitions are represented by the following types of transitions: (1) Intra-role adjustment: referring to an adjustment in orientation to a role that an individual takes in response to experiences and learning over time in the role; (2) Extra-role adjustment: the potential interaction and interdependence of an individual’s multiple life roles; (3) Role/Career-stage transition represents a normal progression through a sequence of stages in the overall career cycle; and (4) Life-stage transition relates to the change of emphasized orientation based on passage through normal staged of human development. In the first category of transitions, an individual takes...
a new and different role or position, whereas in the latter category, an individual assumes a new and different orientation to an old role (Louis, 1980).

Based on Louis’ typology, Nicholson and West (1988, 1989) suggested a similar classification according to three career transition dimensions: status (upwards, lateral, downwards), function (same or changed), and employer (internal or external). This classification included the following major types of directional career transition: (1) internal-upward, (2) external-upward, (3) internal-lateral, (4) external-lateral, (5) internal-downward, and (6) external-downward. Apparently, this classification scheme only addresses the extrinsic perspective of career development and overlooks the subjective perspective of career nature. In a comprehensive review of the empirical research conducted from 1994 to 1998, Sullivan (1999) proposed a third career transition classification based on the concept of boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). It included (1) transitions across occupational boundaries; (2) transitions across organizational boundaries; (3) changes in the meaning of employment relationships; (4) network relationships; (5) transitions across the boundaries between roles; and (6) transitions across boundaries within roles.

Ng, Sorensen, Eby, and Feldman (2007), building on Nicholson and West’s (1988) classification, proposed a multi-level theoretical framework to describe individuals’ career transitions. This framework specifies three theoretical perspectives: (1) The structural perspective, suggesting that macro-level factors (e.g. economic conditions and industry differences) determine the opportunity structure of career transition in the labor market; (2) The individual difference perspective, suggesting that dispositional attributes affect a person’s preferences for and subsequent behaviors associated with career transition; and (3) The decisional perspective, suggesting that decisions to engage in career transition are based on the
evaluation of three factors: subjective norms, the desirability of the transition option and individuals’ readiness for change.

In summary, emphasis on the conceptual understanding of career transition has been placed on classifying the phenomenon and explaining the causal relationships between one or more determinants and career transition outcomes (Hilton, 1962; Hulin, et al, 1985; Jackofsky & Peters, 1983; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Ng, et al, 2007). It is ultimately in line with the traditional school of thought in that identifying major variables and the correlations is the major approach to conceptual understanding of the phenomenon. However, career transition is a complex, dynamic and ever-evolving phenomenon (Hall, 2002; Wise & Millward, 2005). Just as Lee (1966) has pointed out, “in every area there are countless factors which act to hold people with the area or attract people to it, and there are others which tend to repel them” (p. 30). These factors or forces are necessary, but are not sufficient, to explain the career transition phenomenon (Neapolitan, 1980).

Existing theoretical literature is less developed in the two following areas. First, how does career transition unfold as a process? Second, how do multiple factors interact or interrelate during the career transition process to bring about change. In other words, the causal process of career transition cannot be understood as a linear relationship. As a result, the research on the VCT or VTO phenomenon has been described as “knowing a great deal about a limited portion of a broad phenomenon” (Lee & Mitchell, 1996, p. 5).

A notable exception is Lee and Mitchell’s work (1994). This model unfolds a career transition from the naturalistic paradigm and is a departure from the traditional normative research, which has been driven by a model that holds career transition as a result from a particular combination of job dissatisfaction and perceived job
alternatives (e.g., Mobley, 1977). Using image theory, the process of employee turnover was modeled as four distinctive paths. The model challenges the traditional understanding of career transition and argues that (1) factors other than affect can initiate the turnover process, (2) employees may or may not compare a current job with alternatives, and (3) a compatibility judgment, instead of the subjective expected utility decision model may be used by individual (Lee & Mitchell, 1996).

In general, the model emphasizes the complexity and dynamics of the VCT/VTO process and suggests that future research needs to take into account of how people make their career transitions (Holtom, et al, 2008). However, this conceptual model has only received partial support from limited empirical verification (Lee, et al, 1999). Another weakness of the model is that it is only concerned with the first half of a career transition process and ends with the VTO behavior. Therefore, it does not address the “so what” question for understanding the VCT phenomenon.

**Empirical Research**

A century-long journey of career development research by Western scholars has generated a rich pool of empirical studies in various disciplines with different foci (Carter & Cook, 1995; Tu, Forret, & Sullivan, 2006; Sun & Wang, 2009a). The complexity of the empirical literature can be characterized by the following attributes: (1) Multi-disciplinary: A rich body of empirical literature can be found in the fields of psychology, management, sociology (occupational sociology), and HRD/HRM. (2) Multi-level: Given the different foci by different disciplines, the subject of career development and career transition has been studied at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. (3) Multi-method: both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used for the empirical inquiries. The complexity of the literature makes the
organization of this synthesized review difficult to follow any single attribute presented previously. The following review will consider the aforementioned attributes and follow a chronological progress in empirical knowledge accumulation when possible.

**Pioneering Studies: Grounded Theory Approach**

It should not be a surprise that the initial empirical effort on organizational careers and career transition was pioneered by Glaser (1968a), one of the founding fathers of grounded theory, in the beginning of exploring the career development phenomena. This effort was launched from a sociological perspective and was based on the ground breaking establishment of the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The purpose of this pioneering effort was to “start the generation of a formal, grounded theory of organizational careers” (p. 2) through a collection of rich descriptions of organizational careers at the time, and by initial comparative analysis of the descriptions.

The studies covered career development processes in organizations from the aspects of career motivation (Marcson, 1968), loyalty and commitment (Glaser, 1968b), promotion (Martin & Strauss, 1968), demotion (Glaser, 1968c), and organizational succession (Strauss, 1968). The populations of the grounded theory studies included employees in a wide range of industries and positions, such as automobile workers (Chinoy, 1968), telephone workers (Seidman, 1968), manual workers (Blauner, 1968), military (Grusky, 1968), lawyers (Smigel, 1968) and scientists and academia (Glaser, 1968c). The samples of the studies also included chief executives, managers, and supervisors.

Career transition was not a focus of the initial pioneering effort since it was only explored as an unusual phenomenon at the time for some specific careers, such
as school teachers (Becker, 1968), executives (Etzioni, 1968), and medical interns (Glaser, W.1968). Nonetheless, three major types of career transition were identified, including intra-organizational transition, inter-organizational transition, and inter-industry transition.

**Empirical Work by Occupational Sociologists**

Built on an earlier understanding from the grounded theory effort, later studies in occupational sociology on career transition are from a social mobility perspective. Studies in this area include geographical movement, occupational changes, changes between institutions, and changes of status within institutions.

One area of empirical work used national census data to study national mobility. For example, Spilerman (1977), based on Glaser (1968a) and other qualitative studies, used the 1970 U.S. Census data to identify patterns of career mobility in terms of career line change and career returns. Another representative macro-level study on career mobility was conducted by Hout (1984). Using two large national databases collected in 1962 and 1973 on occupational changes in a generation, the study examined the relationship between career mobility, training, autonomy and social status. It found, among other things, that occupations which required specialized training were the ones with the greatest immobility. International comparative studies of career mobility were also conducted during this period. For example, Broom and Jones (1969) compared national data on career mobility in Australia, Italy and the U.S. and found that U.S. showed the most career mobility and Italy the least.

Subsequent studies in this area were gradually switched to individual and organizational levels. A study on organizational career mobility was conducted to identify probability of promotion in a large corporation with 3-year data (Rosenbaum,
The pattern of promotion was found to have three attributes: youth preference, gradual declines, and some promotion chances for older employees. It is worth noting that sociology is the first field to study the relationship between organization commitment and career mobility. Halaby and Sobel (1979) examined the relationships between career mobility, managerial commitment, and opportunity beliefs with 1,242 observations from a large public utility company. The study discovered that upwardly mobile managers tended to be less committed than stayers of equivalent rank. Compared with his non-mobile counterpart, the manager who has achieved his/her current status by advancing through the ranks is more willing to take advantage of outside employment opportunities. This finding is consistent with March and Simon’s model (1958).

**Empirical work in Psychology and Management**

The economic transition in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s saw a burgeoning growth of career transition studies developed in the management and vocational psychology literature (Clopton, 1973; Hiestand, 1971; Louis, 1980; Neapolitan, 1980; Oliver, 1971; Schlossberg, 1975; Thomas, 1980; Vaitenas & Weiner, 1977). Influenced by the developmental theories (Super, 1963; Ginzberg, 1966), studies on mid-career transition (Krantz, 1977; Neapolitan, 1980; Vaitenas & Weiner, 1977) and mid-life transition (Olive, 1971; Schlossberg, 1975; Thomas, 1980) were dominant. Some studies reported that career transition was motivated by a rejection of societal values, particularly the work ethic (e.g., Krantz, 1977), others reported that personality and interest considerations were the major motivations for change (Oliver, 1971; Clopton, 1973, Vaitenas & Weiner, 1977). Studies also captured career changers as conventional persons seeking to move into a different field for the reasons of prestige and advancement (Hiestand, 1971; Schlossberg, 1975).
Overall, studies in this period were mostly focused on examining the effect of intrinsic variables on one’s career transition according to the traditional career development theories.

An exception is an unpublished doctoral dissertation on mid-life career transitions (McQuaid, 1986). The researcher employed a grounded theory approach with comparative analysis and developed a descriptive theory of midlife career transition from real life data. The researcher interviewed 20 individuals who had changed their careers between the ages of 35 and 50. The principle product of the study was a chronological model with four phases, predispositional, confrontational, action, and adjustment. While this unpublished study was among the first to explore the career transition process rather than the causal relationship, it was unsuccessful in developing a “parsimonious conceptual theory” (Glaser, 1978, p.61), which is considered necessary as a grounded theory to interpret and predict phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In fact, the resulting descriptive model from this study is a “full conceptual description (FCD)” (Glaser, 2001, p.30).

In the 1990s, career transitions under a widespread corporate restructuring and reengineering created a new wave of research on the phenomenon. Different perspectives on career transitions were examined, including the impact of career stages (Carter & Cook, 1995), cognitive factors (Heppner, Multon, & Johnston, 1994), experience (Judge & Watanabe, 1995), family status (Judge & Watanabe, 1995), and person-environment fit (Hambrick & Cannella, 1993). Additional empirical studies on career transition were carried out for different populations, such as engineers (Blau & Lunz, 1998), knowledge workers (Lee & Maurer 1997), MBAs graduates (Kilduff & Day, 1994), managers (Stroh, Brett, & Reilly, 1996), and U. S. military officers (Bruce and Scott, 1994). Studies can also be found addressing

**Studies on career transition factors.** As a career transition is often considered an individual behavior, it is reasonable to see empirical studies exploring personal factors as antecedents of career transition. Along this line, personal attributes and beliefs are the constructs most frequently noted by empirical studies to explain and predict career transitions guided by the traditional theories and models (Brown, 1995; Egri & Ralston, 2007; Goldthorpe et al, 1968; Judge & Watanabe, 1995; Kalleberg, 1977; Neapolitan, 1980; Russell, 1975; Schaffer, 1953; Wise & Millward, 2005; Wofford, 1971). For instance, a comparative study on adolescents from West and East Germany explored the influence of career maturity to career choices (Schmitt-Rodermund & Silbereisen, 1998). Another study revealed five factors representing psychological resources available during career transitions, namely readiness, confidence, perceived support, control, and decision making independence (Heppner, Multon, & Johnston, 1994). However, empirical studies with traditional models of individual characteristics and attitudinal variables have long been criticized as insufficient in predicting and explaining the career transition behavior (e.g. Abelson, 1987; Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Wise & Millward, 2005).

**Job satisfaction and organizational commitment.** Limitations in the above mentioned empirical studies have led scholars to consider alternative variables to explain career transitions, especially cross-organizational transitions. As a result, organizational commitment, professional commitment (Blau & Lunz, 1998) and job satisfaction (Breeden, 1993) were identified as new constructs for cross-organizational career transition research.
Job satisfaction is frequently considered an important determinant in explaining career transitions in empirical studies (Breeden, 1993; Igbaria, Greenhous, & Parasuraman, 1991; Gupta, Guimaraes, & Raghunathan, 1992). For example, a two-year follow-up study of job transitions among 436 adults verified the correlation between job satisfaction and job change (Breeden, 1993). The study found that during the study period, 36 percent of the sample changed jobs, 39 percent changed occupations. Only 25 percent remained with no change. Those who changed careers had significantly greater satisfaction than those who made no changes. However, job satisfaction was not found to be a strong predictor of career transition. Similarly, Lee and Maurer (1997), in a study of engineers’ voluntary transitions revealed that turnover theories that focused on job satisfaction were not applicable to the careers of a growing segment of the workforce – knowledge workers (i.e., computer scientists, engineers, and social scientists). The study further revealed that, in addition to the satisfaction variable, knowledge workers leave organizations also because of the following reasons: (a) to enact previously developed action plans, (b) in reaction to an abhorrent event, and (c) in response to attractive alternatives. In fact, these findings confirmed the traditional framework of desirability and ease of movement in explaining employee turnover.

Organizational commitment is another key variable related to employee turnover in the management literature (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Cohen, 1991, 1993; Wasti, 2003). The rationale is that committed employees tend to remain with their employing organizations and have less intention to make a career transition (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). Cohen (1991) demonstrated that the relationship between organizational commitment and turnover was stronger for employees in their early career stages (i.e., up to 30 years old) than those in later career stages. In a
meta-analysis on previous empirical studies, Cohen (1993) further examined the hypothesis that “the relationship between organizational commitment and turnover will be stronger the shorter the time elapsed between the measurement of the two variables” (p.1141). This study discovered a strong relationship between the two variables and the importance of organizational commitment as a predictor of turnover.

However, a study of 191 US nurses reached a different conclusion (Abelson, 1987). This study divided nurses into three groups, avoidable leavers, unavoidable leavers, and stayers. It found that unavoidable leavers and stayers in an organization had no difference on the levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, among other variables examined. Only avoidable (voluntary) leavers were significantly different from the above two groups in job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This finding indicated that the combined effect of both organizational commitment and job satisfaction influenced the voluntary career transitioners. A later study examined 457 medical technologists’ intentions to leave their profession (Blau & Lunz, 1998). The study revealed that male, younger and less satisfied technologists showed greater intent to change careers. When age, satisfaction, and gender were controlled, professional commitment became a significant variable in differentiating those intending to stay from those intending to leave.

Another construct found highly related to organizational commitment and perceived job satisfaction that is influential to VCT or VTO is psychological contract with the organization (Rousseau, 1989, Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Psychological contract refers to an individual’s belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the person and another party (Rousseau, 1989). A psychological contract between an employee and an employer emerges when both parties believe that a promise of future return has been made, such as pay
for performance. A violation of psychological contract occurs when one party in a relationship perceives another failed to fulfill promised obligations (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Two major types of violation of psychological contract from the employer’s side, hence directly or indirectly cause their VCT are procedural and distributive injustice induced violation (Shepard, Lewicki & Miniton, 1992). Specifically, Rousseau and Aquino (1993) have found that certain procedural justice mechanisms can reduce the sense of unfairness associated with terminating employees.

From an organizational psychology perspective, Wilk, Desmarais, and Sackett (1995) have conducted two separate but closely related studies to examine the relationships between individual cognitive ability, job complexity, and job mobility. The first was a longitudinal study following 3,887 individuals making career transitions in five years. The second was a cross sectional study of 6,051 individuals. Both studies verified the hypothesis that people tended to move to a job commensurate with their abilities, suggesting that career transitions were caused by individuals attempting to identify the right match between their cognitive ability and job requirements. The findings validated traditional person-job matching theories.

It is clear that the majority of empirical studies have paid more attention to the variables determining pre-transition and turnover in organizations or professions. Such variables may either be internal to individuals, such as personal attributes or beliefs, or their attitude or beliefs to organizations. More recent studies, building on the understanding of the determinants of career transitions, have begun to explore variables related to post-transition outcomes.

Studies on career transition outcomes. While the vast majority of career transition research has paid more attention to the pre-transition decision making and
why people leave, the transition outcome of how “leavers” respond to their new jobs was less explored in the literature until recently (Boswell, Boulreau, and Tichy, 2005; Trevor, Hausknecht, & Howard, 2007). Only a few studies can be found examining the post-transition outcomes.

A longitudinal study examined the relationship between inter-organizational career transition and job satisfaction through a sample of 538 executives in the US organizations (Bosewell, Boudreaus & Tichy, 2005). Through examining the whole transition process, the study identified a honeymoon-hangover effect to explain the rise and fall of employee job satisfaction after the career transition (Boswell, Boulreau, & Tichy, 2005). From a perspective of job performance quality (high performer vs. low performer), a more recent study by Trevor, Hauknecht, and Howard (2007) investigated post-transition outcomes of 2,500 former employees of an organization in the leisure and hospitality industry located across the United States. The study examined whether pre-transition job performance mattered for post-transition new-job outcomes. It examined correlations between the individual transition status to predict further career development, such as post-quit employment, new-job pay, and new-job advancement opportunity. The findings indicated that high performers tended to quit for better pay and advancement opportunities compared to low performers; but they were less likely to quit jobs caused by failure to understand the job, increased job demands, one’s supervisor, and an absenteeism policy. Interestingly, the study did not find support for the prediction that high performers would be more successful in advancing their careers such as to garner a better new job pay and advancement opportunity in the new job. This implied that high performance leavers and low performance leavers had no significance differences in new job pay and new job advancement opportunities.
A number of empirical studies have also explored the variant types of career transitions according to Louis’ (1980) typology. Bruce and Scott (1994) tested Louis’ (1980) model on inter-role transitions by examining the voluntary career transitions of U.S. naval officers. Two other studies applied Louis’ (1980) model with conflicting findings. The first was on lateral transitions as part of the career development process in a large U.S. pharmaceutical company (Campion, Cheraskin, & Stevens, 1994). The study found that the rate of job change was positively related to career measures such as promotion, salary growth, and improved knowledge and skills. The other study, however, showed that frequent lateral moves had a negative effect on salary, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Murrell, Frieze, & Olson, 1996).

**Empirical Studies on New Career Concepts**

Insufficient empirical research exists on the topic of career transitions based on new career concepts (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010; Wise & Millward, 2005). In fact, Arthur and Rousseau (1996) revealed that 74% of the studies on careers assumed environmental stability, 76% had an intra-firm focus, and 81% had hierarchical assumptions, indicating a clear pattern that existing studies were still based on the traditional career theories. The so-called new career concepts have received limited attention in the empirical literature in describing and explaining career related behavior in the contemporary context. Furthermore, Rodrigues and Guest (2010) have noted that there is little systematic evidence presented to show careers becoming more boundaryless.

Indeed, only a few studies were identified in this particular area. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design, Wise and Millward (2005) attempted to capture the career transition experience of the current generation of 30-somethings, reputed to have better recognition of the new boundaryless careers and more likely to experience
multi-directional, dynamic and fluid career paths. It examined ten participants’ voluntary career transition processes and their cognitive decision making process. The findings indicated that the contemporary protean career concept is more relevant in explaining the career transition experience than the traditional career stage theories. In a comparative study between the different national context in the UK and the USA, Donnelly (2009) has examined career transition behavior of 250 knowledge workers in consulting industry. With mixed methods approach, this multi-level study confirmed that cross organizational boundary career transition characterizes the career behavior for this group of knowledge workers in the two nations.

Managers’ Career Transitions

Early empirical research on VCT was mostly focused on the working-class (Neapolitan, 1980). Studies on managers’ VCT had not begun to accumulate until the late 1970s, perhaps influenced by the turbulent socioeconomic context and increased concerns on managers’ turnover in organizations (Thomas, 1980). Again, the empirical understanding of managerial career transition was initiated through a grounded theory approach.

Given the limited knowledge about managers’ career transitions at the time, Neapolitan (1980) performed a grounded theory study with 25 managers and professionals. Through the analysis of extensive interviews, the study discovered four clusters of factors that influenced career transition decisions, including factors associated with the first and second occupations, obstacles to change a job, and personal factors. The findings were supportive of traditional career developmental theory and social cognitive theory. A similar study with a sample of 73 male managers and middle-class professionals by Thomas (1980) also used a qualitative approach to examine the outcomes of career transitions. The study described career
transitions as a function of both personal desires for change and external pressure to leave. It further dichotomized the outcomes of career transitioners into four types: Drift-outs, Opt-outs, Force-outs, and Bow-outs. The four types of transitioners were found to differ in education level, additional training for career change, time taken to make the change, radicalness of change, and the importance of personal values in deciding to leave their former careers. Additionally, the researcher found that the post-transition career satisfaction was quite high.

The qualitative understanding has resulted in substantial quantitative studies on managerial career transitions (e.g., Boswell, Boudreau, & Tichy, 2005; Brett & Stroh, 1997; Dreher & Cox, 2000; Hambrick & Cannella, 1993; Hyvonen, et al, 2009; Kilduff & Day, 1994; Krishnan, 2009; Lam & Dreher, 2004; Murrell, Frieze, & Olson, 1996; Stroh, Brett, and Reilly, 1996; Thomas, 1979, 1980). Some of the studies have examined the antecedents of managers’ career transitions; others have explored the outcomes of the career transitions. For example, adding to the findings on job satisfaction by Thomas (1980), Boswell, et al., (2005) found that the satisfaction level of managerial transition was initially high but declined over time.

In addition to the variables common to other groups of populations, a variety of other factors influencing managerial career transition were examined. Hambrick and Cannella (1993) showed that executives of acquired firms were more likely to leave when they perceived that their relative standing in the company was low. Stroh, Brett, and Reilly (1996) reported that despite popular beliefs, female managers were more likely to leave the firm because of lack of career opportunities, job dissatisfaction, or disloyalty to the employer, than for family considerations. Another longitudinal study tracked 139 graduates of a MBA program for five years and revealed significant effects of the personality variable – self monitoring on career
transition and mobility (Kilduff & Day, 1994). The study exhibited that high self-monitors (i.e., those especially aware of role expectations and social cues) were more likely to change employers and locations compared to low self-monitors. A few more studies have also looked at whether managers could improve their compensation attainment if they take career transition as an external market strategy (Brett & Stroh, 1997; Dreher & Cox, 2000; Lam & Dreher, 2004).

Career Development Studies on Chinese Managers

Recent literature has shown an increasing interest in career development research in the Chinese context. Yet, compared to the Western literature, career development and managerial career transition is still at a formative stage in China (Sun & Wang, 2009b). A limited number of studies have been identified in all databases searched. Two reasons for the paucity of research on Chinese managerial career development were identified by Tu, Forret, and Sullivan (2006). First, because of government prohibition, it is difficult to collect data in a communist country like China. Second, its long history and rich culture differ greatly from those of Western nations and make it difficult for Western scholars to comprehend nuances of the Chinese ways of life and the context. This may also explain why most recent career development studies on Chinese managers have been conducted by scholars of Chinese origin, at least for the principal researchers (e.g. Gao & Zhang, 2009; Sun & Wang, 2009b; Tu, Forret, & Sullivan, 2006; Wong & Slater, 2002; Wong, 2007).

At a macro level, a number of studies have highlighted the contextual background and challenges facing contemporary Chinese society. These studies have ranged from the transitional nature of the socioeconomic context (Wang & Liao, 2006), challenges in management development (Wang, Rothwell, & Sun, 2009) to
historical evolution of career guidance (Zhang, Hu, & Pope, 2002) and to the Communist Party’s influence on individual career opportunities (Zhang, et al., 2002).

Among the limited studies on managerial career development in China, one particular study deserves attention. Wong and Slater (2002), in one of the first pilot studies on career development in China, employed a phenomenological approach to exploring how much executive career development in China corresponded to Western notions and related Chinese managers’ characteristics and career patterns. They interviewed 49 managers in Beijing and Shanghai in organizations of all types of ownership systems. The study showed that “guanxi” (direct or indirect personal relationship to solicit favors) mechanisms and types of ownership were factors determining managers’ career opportunities.

The majority of identified studies on career related research in the Chinese context are focused on validating existing Western theories and they have often found that the results based on theories developed in the West can hardly be duplicated due to contextual differences (e.g., Bian, 1997; Gao and Zhang, 2009; Sun & Wang, 2009b; Tu, Forest, and Sullivan, 2006). Tu, Forest, and Sullivan (2006), surveyed a sample of 143 Chinese managers and examined whether factors associated with career success in Western countries (e.g. demographic, human capital, motivational, and organizational) were also related to the career outcomes of Chinese managers. Their findings did not support previous findings of career success conducted in the West, highlighting the importance of cultural context when investigating career issues across national borders. This study suggested that well-established career theories developed in the West may have little generalizability to individuals in non-Western contexts.

Similarly, another study of 117 Taiwanese managers in examining a popular Western career concept, career anchors (Schein, 1985) showed that cultural specificity and
political dynamics had greater impact on Chinese managers’ career experience (Wong, 2007). Likewise, in validating the social cognitive career theory in the Chinese context, Gao and Zhang (2009) studied 261 Chinese managers’ career choice in relation to their career outcome expectations, self-efficacy, career commitment, and job performance. Unlike comparable studies conducted in the West (e.g., Van-Vianen & Annelies, 1999), the study was unable to confirm some important relationships among the variables.

Another frequently visited construct in career development research is social relationships. Social relationships in Chinese society are characterized by a strong emphasis on particularistic ties (e.g. kinship, same natal origin and classmates), reciprocity (King, 1991; Tsui & Farh, 1997) and role obligation (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Yang, 1993). In sociology research, studies on the efficacy and strengths of network ties in job search and career transition are tools to understand socioeconomic and institutional transition associated changes. A Western-based “strength-of-weak-ties” hypothesis states that in a job search process, individuals are matched to jobs more frequently and more effectively through weak ties than strong ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1974). This hypothesis has been confirmed with samples from Boston (Granovetter, 1974) and New York (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981). It is also verified through comparative findings using samples from Germany, the Netherlands, and the U.S. (DeGraaf & Flap 1988). However, the validation of the same hypothesis using data obtained from China (Bian, 1997) and Japan (Watanabe, 1987) finds strong ties rather than weak ties are associated more with successful job searches.

Although an increased interest in career development research in the Chinese context is observed, study on career transition is scarce. Among the limited empirical studies on career development in China, only one validation study was identified
focusing on VCTs of Chinese managers (Sun & Wang, 2009b). This study surveyed 273 Chinese managers, who graduated from a MBA program in a central city in China for two consecutive classes and explored the career transition phenomenon in the transformational socioeconomic context. Based on existing career transition theories drawn from the Western literature, the study investigated the patterns of career transitions among Chinese managers. While some transition types were similar across national borders, the study identified two additional types of career transition that were unique to the Chinese context, namely, geographical career transition and inter-system career transition. The study also showed unique constraints and challenges facing Chinese managers that were completely different from those of their Western counterparts.

In fact, it has been argued that there is a dire need for more theory-building studies and less pure application or validation of existing Western theories in the Chinese context in order to enrich the global knowledge base (Tsui, 2004; 2006; Barney & Zhang, 2009). In the meantime, a growing number of studies have found Western theories when applied to China to be inadequate, and sometimes, inappropriate. Studies focusing on validating existing theories are likely to overlook the contextual specificity and miss important opportunities for building novel theory. For instance, Meyer and Lu (2005) reported a Chinese company’s structure unheard of by any Western executive (p. 57). They wrote, “Tacitly, most researchers view organizations as bounded, tightly coupled and more or less rational systems . . . In the case of China, incomplete separation of firms from the state, incomplete integration of firms and partial listing of assets have left most Chinese firms with indefinite boundaries” (p. 57). Validating any existing Western-based organization theory under
this particular setting with embedded sociocultural contexts is unlikely to generate
theory that can explain the organizational dynamics.

One may find that other culturally related constructs, such as loyalty and
reward systems, will also influence individuals’ careers in the Chinese context. For
example, it is well known that Chinese are more loyal to individuals than to a system
or organization (e.g. Wang, 2011; Redding, 1990). In spite of its recent effort to build
up its legal infrastructure, China remains a society characterized by rule of man
(where relationships matter) more than rule of law (Chen & Francesco, 2000; Walder,
1991). In such a cultural context, employee loyalty to the supervisor is more direct,
salient and intense in driving employee behavior. In comparison, employee
commitment to the organization is less direct, salient and intense in motivating
employee behavior. Loyalty to supervisor has a variety of consequences, such as
attendance, careers, and job satisfaction (Chen, Tsui, & Farh, 2002).

Similarly, Chen (1995) has compared the reward allocation preferences of a
sample of U.S. and Chinese employees and found that Chinese preferred differential
rules for reward allocation, whereas Americans preferred egalitarian rules.
Specifically, the Chinese had a preference for a differential rule in both material and
socioemotional rewards. In contrast, the Americans had stronger preference for
egalitarian socioemotional rewards than for material rewards. The author proposed
some non-intuitive hypotheses drawing on his rich knowledge of the context.

In short, the unique social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of China
provide scholars with a natural research laboratory to explore new possibilities for
theory building research. Exploring the career transition phenomenon with an
inductive and indigenous approach in this unique context is likely to produce fruitful
results.
Summary of Empirical Research

To summarize the empirical research on career development in general and career transition specifically, the following pattern and trends have been identified from the literature review and analysis. First, the empirical investigations of a new career phenomenon or area of interest is often initiated by studies with inductive qualitative approaches (e.g., Glaser, 1968; Neapolitan 1980; Thomas, 1980; Wong & Slater, 2002) and followed by subsequent quantitative verification studies. Second, existing research, regardless of the discipline, focuses more on specific variables or causal relationships between the variables than on the causal process of career transition. However, a clear trend in the literature is to explore the unknown process of contemporary career transition and develop an understanding of the nature of career transition (Lee & Mitchell, 1994, 1996; Wise & Millward, 2005). Third, empirical research on career transition in non-Western settings has just begun and is very limited in number. It is well accepted that theories developed in Western cultures may not be applicable to HRD/HRM and career phenomena in a non-Western context, particularly in China (Gao & Zhang, 2009; Sun & Wang, 2009b; Wong & Slater, 2002; Wong, 2007). Fourth, considering the importance of managers for organizations, more empirical research is needed to explore their career transition experiences. Existing research has provided limited understanding of career transition processes of this particular group.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a multidisciplinary literature review on career development and career transition and established the foundation for the proposed study. For the conceptual review, influential career development and related decision
making theories were discussed along with the implications to career transition research. Career transition specific theories and models that offer a foundation for understanding of the career transition phenomenon were presented. The empirical research on career transition from a multidisciplinary perspective was reviewed, relative to the uniqueness of Chinese context revealed in the literature. Through literature analysis, the necessity of conducting context-specific research in China has been articulated. Lastly, the synthesis of research patterns has identified research gaps from the literature on career transitions.

The literature review has shown that, while a large body of literature has examined the career transition phenomenon, the variables and the causal relationships among the variables have been the center of the attention for the last three decades. It seems that the antecedents of career transitions or voluntary turnovers, are well studied (Holtom, et al, 2008). In contrast, it is less clear how people make decisions during the transition process, as pointed out by Lee and Mitchell (1996) who have acknowledged that we only know a great deal about a limited portion of a broad phenomenon. The review suggested shifting research attention from the traditional paradigm to focusing on the real life process of career transition in relation to the specific timing, context, and circumstances, in order to gain rich knowledge on this interactive, complex, and dynamic phenomenon.

Further, there has been limited empirical research on the career transition phenomenon in non-Western contexts. More specifically, within the Chinese context, only a limited number of validation studies, based on theories derived in Western contexts have been conducted. The review of career development research in China has unveiled both the necessity and the reasons for the paucity of research on Chinese managerial career development and career transition.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHOD

This chapter presents the traditional grounded theory approach as the qualitative method that is employed for the study. It includes an articulation of the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, data gathering and analysis procedures. The assumptions and issue influencing the study are also discussed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate Chinese managers’ voluntary career transitions (VCTs) in the contemporary Chinese organizational and socioeconomic context.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

(1) What are the major determinants of voluntary career transitions experienced by Chinese managers?

(2) What is the career transition process experienced by Chinese managers who chose to do so voluntarily?

(3) What are the outcomes of such voluntary career transitions?
Design of the Study

The design of this study was drawn upon the traditional grounded theory approach as the qualitative research method. Its purpose is to generate a theory on how Chinese managers make voluntary career transitions. To this end, a grounded theory approach is used to guide the proposed study in data collection and analysis. Interviews and observations were employed as the primary methods of data collection (Kvale, 1996). A specific purposeful sampling strategy was used to identify and recruit potential research participants. A pilot study has been conducted which resulted in the refinement of the interview protocol.

Rationale for the Methodological Approach

The choice of research method and approach depends on the research subject, the purpose and the objective of the study, as well as existing literature (Silverman, 2001). The most appropriate methodological design for this study is the traditional grounded theory approach as the qualitative method.

Rationale for Using Qualitative Research

Qualitative research aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the factors that govern such behavior (Cresswell, 2002). It is not only more adaptable when examining multiple, but difficult to aggregate, realities than quantitative research, but is also more sensitive to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered in the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, a qualitative approach offers the following advantages in exploring the research questions this study attempts to address: (1) It is a naturalistic inquiry; (2) Researchers serve as an instrument; (3) It adopts an emergent design; and (4) It is an inductive approach (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Cuba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).
The naturalistic ontology underlying qualitative research regards realities as wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts, nor can they be fragmented for separate study of the parts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, unlike quantitative research that takes apart phenomenon to examine its components, qualitative research aims to reveal how well parts work together to form a whole. Furthermore, qualitative researchers are the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The data collected is mediated through the researcher rather than through a nonhuman instrument such as a questionnaire or a computer. In this sense, researchers are adaptive to the context of the study. Moreover, qualitative research embraces an emergent design. This type of design adds flexibility and allows findings to emerge rather than being constructed according to preconceived notions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is consistent with the unpredictable nature of qualitative inquiry. Additionally, qualitative research adopts an inductive analytical approach rather than a deductive one. This is particularly important when conducting research in a new context and when little is known about the phenomenon being studied.

**Rationale for Using a Grounded Theory Approach**

The grounded theory method, as one of the important qualitative approaches, is well suited to investigate the identified research gap because it aims to develop a new theory based on contextualized data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978).

Theory building capacity is embedded in the grounded theory method. By definition, grounded theory was originally developed as a method to discover theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 5). In other words, grounded theory’s distinguishing characteristic is that theory is discovered and emerges from data. The responsiveness of grounded theory research is aimed at contextual value (Glaser, 1978). The major assumption of grounded theory is that the development of a rigorous
theory is most likely to occur when it emerges from a thorough analysis of contextual
data.

With the grounded theory method, the researcher establishes emerging
impressions from evidence, conceptualizes the data, and then analyzes emerging
relationships between concepts. Therefore, the researcher is expected to initially
“ignore” related literature and existing theory instead of being guided by them, to
reduce the likelihood of contamination of the data with existing or biased concepts
(Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the meantime, “theoretical sensitivity is accumulated by
the comprehension of existing theories,” and “a discovered, grounded theory, then,
will tend to combine most concepts and hypotheses that have emerged from data with
some existing ones that are clearly useful” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 46).

Closely related to the theory building potential of the grounded theory method
is its focus on constant comparative analysis combined with a theoretical sampling
strategy. Unlike quantitative research requiring random sampling, data collection for
grounded theory research is driven by the emerging theory (Glaser, 1978; Becker,
1993). The theoretical sampling strategy is guided by previous data collection and
comparative analysis during which concepts and categories emerge. The need for
sampling of specific data sources continues until each category is saturated.

The critical interplay of the two features of grounded theory method is clearly
articulated by Strauss and Corbin:

A grounded theory is one that is inductively driven from the study of the
phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally
verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to
that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in
reciprocal relationship to one another (1990, p. 23).
The importance and relevance of the grounded theory method for exploring the proposed research questions can be further discussed from the current state of research in the evolving Chinese context. First, grounded theory is built on the following assumptions: (1) Knowledge is not static; (2) People are undergoing changes; and (3) Context functions to facilitate, hinder, or influence human goals and social psychological processes (Benoliel, 1996). These assumptions are applicable to the career transition phenomena and capable of capturing the variability and complexity of this emerging and important phenomenon in China.

Second, grounded theory is used to develop a theory of basic social processes, such as “how” and “what” of a particular phenomenon by linking processural dimension with structural conditions (Strauss & Corbin, 1987). It is appropriate to address the answers to the above research questions because they explore career transition process as a social process. Through linking processural dimension with contextual social and organizational conditions, this study is likely to unveil theoretical underpinning of the “what” and the “how.”

Last, but not least, the grounded theory approach is important for career transition research in China because of its high potential for generating novel indigenous knowledge from contextual data. Most research in China has used existing Western theoretical frameworks for validation instead of allowing observations to inform theory (Tsui, 2005). While it may be a reasonable approach to ensure “connection” to the existing body of knowledge, a potential problem with this approach is that observations and their analysis are constrained by the variables included in the existing theory and its logic. As shown by examples in the literature review presented in Chapter II, Western theories have been developed on a set of
assumptions using logic that are particular to the Western cultural and institutional underpinnings and may not apply in China.

With the grounded theory method, the focus of contextual value enables the researcher to identify propositions different from the assumptions rooted in Western culture and consequently contribute to developing more general theories. In summary, the use of a qualitative approach with grounded theory method to explore managers’ career transitions in the Chinese context is likely to generate new insights for research on the career transition phenomenon.

**Grounded Theory: Glaserian vs. Straussian**

The literature shows that there exist conflicting rationales and unsettled issues regarding the nature and process of the grounded theory method (Walker & Myrick, 2006). In order to apply this approach with rigor and ensure the transparency of the proposed study, it is necessary to point out the divergence in the literature and discuss my theoretical stance and rationale related to the method chosen.

Since grounded theory became an enduringly popular choice of methodology for the social sciences in the 1960s, it has diverged into two different approaches championed by its founding fathers, Glaser and Strauss, over time. These two approaches are identified as traditional and evolved grounded theories to describe the work of Glaser (traditional) and Strauss and Corbin (evolved) as a result of the divergence (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Essentially, both approaches are similar under the general umbrella of the grounded theory. They both require the researcher to address a set of common characteristics: theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, treatment of the literature, constant comparative methods, coding, identifying the core category, memoing and diagramming, and the measure of rigor (McCann & Clark, 2003).
However, they differ significantly on the researcher’s role in the study and the level of intervention in relation to the procedures used within the data analysis process (Cutcliffe, 2004; Mills, et al, 2006, Walker & Myrick, 2006). While the differences between Glaser and Strauss have been presented by Glaser (1992) in response to Strauss and Corbin (1990), the critical difference at the operational level is around how researchers should derive categories and properties in the coding process.

According to Glaser, in the traditional method, the coding process is made up of two stages, namely, substantive coding and theoretical coding. Substantive coding consists of two sub-phases, open coding and selective coding. Theoretical coding occurs at a conceptual level, weaving the substantive codes together into hypotheses or theory (Glaser, 1978). Strauss and Corbin, the proponents of the evolved method, proposed a seemingly parallel three-step coding process, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (1988). However, their recommended coding process is significantly different from the traditional one.

The divergence in coding procedure essentially is a fundamental methodological difference between “emerging” and “forcing” by the researcher (Glaser, 1992). This is one of the principle drivers that has led to significant differences between Glaser and Strauss (Cutcliffe, 2004). For example, Glaser (1992) stated that when a researcher attempts to bring preconceived ideas to a new study and subsequently forces these ideas on the data, difficulties would arise. Strauss and Corbin’s evolved approach, on the other hand, has encouraged early engagement of developing the dimensions of a category’s properties (i.e., a dimension of “short to long” for the property of distance) as a core task of open coding and axial coding.

In particular, Glaser challenges the categorizing process (axial coding) promoted by Strauss and Corbin as not relevant to the grounded theory method.
because it forces preconceived ideas on the data instead of allowing a theory to emerge from the data. He argues that by asking preconceived questions, the process only produces a full, preconceived conceptual description which is an entirely different goal from generating a theory that explains how a basic social problem is processed in an action system (Glaser, 1992).

Through carefully comparing and analyzing the two approaches, Glaser’s traditional grounded theory approach has been selected for the proposed study. This decision is based on the following considerations. First, a unique advantage of grounded theory is its power to discover new knowledge from data. Glaser’s traditional process allows theories to emerge and avoids forcing the data into categories early in the process. It also allows the researcher’s analytical capacity to be engaged from the very beginning, thus ensures the emerging theory’s quality through constant comparison. It is better suited to discover a parsimonious theory instead of a conceptual description (Glaser, 1978, 1992).

Second, Glaser’s grounded theory analysis process is more consistent with the underlying methodological logic and is more rigorous in generating a concept theoretically through constant comparison. It is more transparent and has potential to increase the credibility and internal validity of a qualitative study. Hence, Glaser’s traditional grounded theory approach, especially theoretical sampling and theoretical coding, is adopted for the proposed study.

**Sampling Strategies, Research Population and the Samples**

Given the focus of the study, the research population was of native Chinese managers. The research population was defined such that: (1) it must consist of middle or senior managers in organizations operating in China and (2) the managers have made a voluntary career transition across organizational boundaries.
To make the data collection manageable, the population was confined to Chinese managers located in Beijing. Beijing has been chosen as the sampling location because it is the capital city of China and one of its most dynamic cities. It leads the rest of China in economic development, and is sufficiently large and representative of capturing the ongoing career transition phenomenon.

**Sampling Procedures**

Generally speaking, research sampling in qualitative studies is not necessarily static or shaped by original conceptualization at the beginning of the research design process. Rather, it is recurrent and emergent in nature (Murphy, et al, 1998). In other words, samples may be identified both at the start of the study and during the emergent research design, even during data analysis process (Higginbottom, 2004).

A purposeful sampling strategy was used in the initial sampling process. Particularly, specific purposeful selection was used (Merriam, 2001). Theoretical sampling was superseded as a major sampling strategy as data collection progressed. The rationale justifying the sampling strategies follows.

**Purposeful vs. theoretical sampling.** Purposeful sampling is a common sampling strategy used in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Under this strategy, research subjects are identified for the purpose of collecting rich, in-depth information capable of addressing the research questions (Merriam, 2001). In order to identify information-rich cases, researchers need to focus on a set of initially preconceived dimensions about sampling criteria (Cutcliffe, 2000). Purposive sampling requires a researcher to gather recommendations and referrals to identify potential participants. Referrals are judged and selected in relation to the participant’s membership of the group (Grbich, 1999).
Meanwhile, sampling with the grounded theory is described as “theoretical” rather than purposeful (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Becker, 1993) in that it is driven by the emerging theory. According to Glaser (1978), theoretical sampling is a process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges (p. 36).

This is a unique distinction not found in conventional “purposive sampling”, even though both terms are sometimes used interchangeably in qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guns, 1985).

In accordance with the grounded theory method, theoretical sampling was employed as a major sampling strategy for the proposed study. However, at the beginning of the sampling process, since there was neither an existing theory, nor a theoretical framework to follow, the sampling was based on some general subject and area criteria (Glaser, 1978). Thus, the data collection process began with purposeful sampling. After the initial data analysis highlighted a direction that further sampling was able to follow, theoretical sampling then replaced purposeful sampling as the primary data collection method in the current research (Coyne, 1997; Cutcliffe, 2000).

**Purposeful sampling and Specific selection** A specific purposeful selection was used in the beginning of data collection. Chinese managers who meet the following criteria were considered for the initial purposeful sampling in this study: (1) Local-born Chinese, (2) Working in business and industry in any industries with at least five years of management experience, (3) Have made a voluntary career transition (move to a new company or new industry) in the past five years, and (4) Have stayed in the current position for at least one year. The first two criteria are to ensure that the research subjects selected are in the defined scope of the study. The
third criterion restricts participants to those who have sufficient recall of the details of their career transition experience, and the last one ensures that the participants have a completed career transition with sufficient experience prior to the study. All criteria combined were used to identify the first two samples for information-rich data on the phenomenon of career transition.

To select participants, I first screened my professional contacts for easy access to potential candidates. After a potential candidate had been identified, I contacted the person through telephone and emailed to make sure the candidate met all criteria defined. For those who were referred through my professional network, I asked the contact person to obtain permission of the potential candidates for disclosing their names and contact information to me. Upon determining the qualifications of a candidate, an email invitation was sent along with an introduction to the study. With the candidate’s agreement to participation, an Informed Consent Letter was sent for signature. The informed consent was used to protect the rights of participants and ensure voluntary participation. Data collection began after receiving the signed consent letter from the potential participants.

**Theoretical sampling.** A conceptual framework began to emerge from the initial purposeful sampling and data analysis of the first two interviews, a theoretical sampling strategy was then adopted as recommended by Glaser (1978). During the theoretical sampling process, the same set of criteria defined for purposeful sampling was followed. Because the criteria defined for the purposeful sampling was necessary but not sufficient for theoretical sampling, the composition of subsequent samples was determined based on the conceptual framework discovered. Twenty interview data was collected before the saturation of the emerging categories. Two additional interviews were conducted to examine the saturation of each category and the
properties of the categories. Overall, twenty-two Chinese managers were interviewed for this study.

**IRB approval.** Approval has been obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UT Tyler and a consent letter for the potential participants was prepared in support of the pilot and subsequent data collection for the research experience. The consent letter highlights the overall purpose and approach of the study, addresses potential risks and benefits to the participants, and emphasizes that involvement in this study is voluntary, and that the participants have the right to withdraw at any time.

Considering the nature of the phenomenon under study, a contentious issue is the protection of participant confidentiality. It is particularly important to explicitly address this issue if more than one participant is to be selected from a same organization or industry. And in this particular research, I did select two participants from the same organization. Individuals have the right to protect their professional image in the industry or organization. I addressed this issue in the following way. I communicated with all participants regarding what would and would not be disclosed in the final report and potential future publications both through written consent letters and verbally at the beginning of interviews. The confidential information included: (a) names of participants, (b) their participant’s address or other contact information, and (c) names of organizations and individuals mentioned by participants during the interviews.
Methods of Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews (Ellinger, 1997; Gremler, 2004) and participant observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Interviews

Interviews are a major source of qualitative data needed for understanding a social phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2001). Patton (2002) described the value of interviews:

We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective… (p. 341)

Selltiz, Jahoda, Deutsch, and Cook (1959) noted that the personal interview is “a superior technique for the exploration of areas where there is little basis for knowing either what questions to ask or how to formulate them” (p. 125). Hence, the interview technique is an appropriate data collection method given the purpose of the study.

With semi-structured interviews, the study captured cognitive and affective data, e.g., respondents’ reflections and self-evaluations of incidents (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998). During interviews, the participants were invited to express their thoughts, feelings, experiences, values and emotions about their career transition experience. A set of predesigned questions was used to frame the interview.
**Interview Guide**

Interviews were directed by an interview guide. The guide frames the discussion and more questions may be asked to probe the details of a career transition experience. At the same time, the subjects were encouraged to digress if they so desired (Glaser, 1978). The interview questions included:

1. Tell me about how you made your most recent career change?
2. What particular event, persons, or conversations with others triggered your intention for the career transition you made?
3. What particular event, person, or conversations with others affected the actual career transition you made?
4. What would have kept you at the previous organization instead of moving to the new position/company?
5. What was the result or outcome of your career transition?

Additionally, probing questions were frequently used during interviews to capture the details of the events and interviewees’ feelings, emotions, actions, and reflections during and after the events for clarification and illustration purposes.

**Interview Arrangement**

Each interview was conducted at a place convenient and comfortable for the participant, either in a quiet coffee house or the interviewee’s office, sometimes at the lobby areas of some office buildings. I provided some options and allowed the participants to choose. This allowed them to relax and to share their personal experiences and feelings at ease. This decision was based on my learning experience from the first two interviews that were scheduled at the interviewees’ offices. But when transcribed the data afterwards, I noticed that interviewees were hesitant to share some company related information during the interviews even though they
understood they were protected by the consent. So I decided to let the interviewees choose a location for the interviews to ensure the quality of the data. Interview schedules were also coordinated with the participant to avoid conflicts with their work and personal lives. Each interview lasted between 90 to 120 minutes. I came to the interview location a few minutes earlier and make sure the environment was suitable to conduct interviews. The above arrangement was to maintain the quality of the data collected (Fontana, 1994).

Upon studying and reflecting on the pilot interviews that I conducted, the interview protocol was revised and necessary changes were made. In additional, to ensure data accuracy, I recorded all interviews with the participants’ permission. I also asked for their permissions to contact them later for further clarification and confirmation of the interview data during my data analysis process.

**Researcher’s Interview Skills**

For the purpose of collecting rich and meaningful interview data, practices on interview skills are necessary. Formerly an executive search consultant and a career development counselor, I have accumulated substantial interview skills, such as skills of asking open-ended questions, probing skills, and observational skills in my past work. However, I also realize that the emphasis of a qualitative inquiry using interview techniques may be different. Patton (2002) posits that the qualitative inquiry “aims to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data.” It emphasizes that “questions should be asked in a truly open-end fashion so that people can respond in their own words” (p. 353). Further, as an interviewer, I have to carefully decide how to effectively use the limited time available in an interview to obtain and probe for as much relevant information as possible (Patton, 2002).
Observations and Field Notes

During the interviews, data was collected not only through recording the dialogues, but also through observing and taking field notes (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Observation can provide in depth “here-and-now experience” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 273). Through observation, data on contextual information as well as nonverbal language was collected to capture participants’ feelings and attitudes that may not be explicit in their words (Merriam, 2001). Data generated through observation was captured in the form of field notes. Field notes were recorded or written before, during, and immediately after the interviews in order to capture the instantaneous information accurately. However, I realized that, as an observer, I might also engage in roles ranging from a non-participant to a complete participant during the observation period (Creswell, 2002, 2003). Indeed, during the interview process, I was part of, rather than separate from, the data. Hence, meaningful interactions between me and the interviewees was also recorded in my field notes. The field notes were taken following Creswell’s (2003) observational protocol (See Appendix C).

Data Documentation

All interviews were conducted in Chinese, which was the native language of all of the interviewees, in order to capture the precise meaning of words used by the interviewees. With the interviewees’ consent, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed to assure no important data was omitted in subsequent analysis. I proofread transcripts and field notes for accuracy within 36-72 hours of the interview.

I have noticed that many times participants used Chinese culture based proverbs and stories to describe their experiences and perceptions about their career transitions, In order to capture the exact meaning of interview conversations, I used Chinese language for the data collection, documentation, and initial analysis.
Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is a process that involves “working with the data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell to others” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 153). As a process embedded in the grounded theory method, data analysts are the actors “who intervene, manipulate, act on, conceptualize, and use specific techniques to generate or discover the theory” (Walker & Myrick, 2006).

Data collection and analysis for this study were carried out simultaneously as stipulated by the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is critical because of the need for continuous adjustment of the direction of data collection and pursuing new evidence and dimensions as they emerge from the data (Egan, 2002; Hansen, 2005; Silverman, 2005). Specifically, data collection and analysis for the study followed the procedure below: After a subject had been interviewed, the recording was transcribed and proofread within 72 hours. Successive interviews were guided by the analysis of previously gathered data. As the number of interviews grows, the data and the codes were compared against one another as well as analyzed on their own merits.

Coding Process

Coding is a central part of the grounded theory discovery journey. The codes, as building blocks of the emerging theory, conceptualize the underlying pattern of a set of empirical indicators within the data. In generating a theory by developing hypothetical relationships between conceptual codes (categories and their properties) which have been generated from the data as indicators, one can “discover” a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978).
The coding procedure recommended by Glaser (1978) includes two phases, substantive coding and theoretical coding. First, substantive codes are to “conceptualize the empirical substances of the area of research”. Substantive coding consists of two sub-phases, open coding and selective coding.

Open coding was used as the first step of data analysis. Open coding is “coding the data in every way possible”, to generate as many categories as possible, (Glaser, 1978). “The open coding minimizes whatever ‘trip’, whether from preconceived thought or from latent training, may be laid on the data that can force or distort its meaning” (p. 56). During open coding, data was analyzed line by line and sentence by sentence. All data from the interviews, and observations captured in the field notes was coded in order to generate a full coverage of categories of career transition including all relevant data as indicators.

The codes needed to capture the interviewee’s real meanings, and then to be categorized into different categories to ensure the codes stick to data closely (Glaser, 1992, 1998). Upon reflecting on the previous experience and comparing with the methodological literature, I decided to adopt Charmaz (2006) “-ing” coding format to ensure the rigor of the open coding process. With the coding technique, I was able to focus on the actions in each segment of data instead of applying a preconceived category. The patterns and relationships among the data emerged, and provided a foundation for the theoretical integration.

During open coding process, I frequently interrupted coding to memo new ideas. A new set of data was created by categorizing and labeling the emerging concepts that focused on the research questions during this phase. The data collection and coding process occurred simultaneously, because open coding guided decisions about theoretical sampling. Three independent scholars were involved in this process
to code the data separately. Their coding result was then compared with mine to improve the reliability of the conceptual codes.

Making constant comparisons and asking questions of the data are two analytical procedures essential to this phase (Glaser, 1978, 1992). Incidents were compared with incidents, and with emerging concepts (categories and their properties); concepts were compared with concepts, until each category was saturated. Glaser (1978) emphasizes that open coding carries with it verification, correction, and saturation phenomenon (p. 60).

Selective coding, as the second component of substantive coding, focuses on one core variable, often a basic social process or condition. To selectively code a core variable implies that “the analyst delimits the coding to only those variables that relate to the core variable in sufficiently significant ways to be used in a parsimonious theory” (Glaser, 1978, p.61). These variables may include conditions and consequences that relate to the core process. Nine categories emerged through selective coding around the core construct, and four types of career transition process were generated from the constant comparison of the data and categories while the selective codes were focused on the major variance among the four types of VCT processes.

The second phase of the data analysis was theoretical coding. Theoretical codes are generated to “conceptualize how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into the theory” (p.55). Theoretical coding was a process of using theoretical codes, the abstract form of substantive codes, to generate hypotheses to be integrated into a theory (Glaser, 1978). As a grounded theory researcher, my task in this phase was to integrate the data around a central theme, hypothesis, or story to generate a theory (Glaser, 1978). Using theoretical codes, I was
able to “weave the fractured story back together” into an integrated one at the conceptual level (p. 72). Finally, theoretical codes provided an integrative scope, becoming the emerging theory. Although substantive and theoretical coding were two distinct analytical procedures and were discussed separately in this chapter, the processes were not done in a linear pattern. I was engaged in the two processes simultaneously, moving back and forth between the two for eleven months during the analysis. Finally, a theory of voluntary career transition in the Chinese context emerged from the analysis.

Partial data strips and all codes generated during the analysis process were translated into English. Translation is transformation of a text including creation and manipulation while adhering to the original text between different languages (Berman, 1992). For coherence, I translated the transcripts for meaning rather than verbatim so that the translated meaning was preserved in English (Patton, 2002). Additionally, I engaged a bilingual researcher and a scholarly practitioner in checking my translation to ensure the original meaning was retained. Both of them have more than 9 years of experience as HRD professionals and are located in the states. One of them is a university professor in HRD while the other is the vice president of human resource in a private company.

**Methodological Rigor and Credibility**

Because of the flexible nature of qualitative methodologies, there is no single way to judge the scientific merit or credibility of a qualitative research. Commonly used criteria for reliability and validity in quantitative perspective have been argued to be inappropriate when used to examine the quality of a qualitative study (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The traditional grounded theory approach has provided a unique set of
criteria to evaluate the quality of the research. These criteria may not be convergent with the commonly used evaluation framework of trustworthiness in qualitative research as suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1985). Therefore, it is necessary to select valid criteria to ensure the quality and credibility of this proposed study.

Patton (1999) asserted that the quality and credibility intersect with audience and intended research purposes. This suggests that the rigor or credibility is not embedded in the research method or technique itself. Rather, it should be evaluated in relation to the research purpose and potential audience. The grounded theory approach has been adopted for its singular commitment to allowing a new theoretical understanding (new theory) to emerge from real life data. Hence, the critical issue in evaluating the quality of this study should be the credibility of the research process in relation to theory building.

**Credibility of Grounded Theory Approach**

“The credibility of a theory should be won by its integration, relevance and workability, not by illustration used as if it were proof” (Glaser, 1978, p. 134). Glaser further defines three criteria to evaluate a theory that emerged from grounded theory approach. It “must have fit and relevance, and it must work” (p. 4).

“Fit” means the “categories of the theory must fit the data (p.4). Data should not be forced to fit pre-conceived or pre-existent categories or discarded in favor of keeping an extant theory. This is done by keeping an open mind as much as possible, trusting the data, engaging in further comparison, allowing the theory to emerge (Cutcliffe, 2005). My coding experience has proved that when a category was truly grounded in the data and closely stick to data, it would have more explanatory power to the emerging theory. However, it does not mean existing literature should be ignored, it just needs to be put aside at the beginning of the study. In fact, after the
core concept emerged, I have conducted a second round of literature review. Consequently, many existing categories in the literature were proven to fit the data well. The researcher needs to develop an emergent fit between the data and a pre-existing category that may work to modify the emerging theory (Glaser, 1978, p.4).

“Relevancy” measures if the theory reflects the core problems and processes emerging from the data. Relevancy can be automatically achieved if the researcher strictly follows the theoretical sampling and allows the core problems and processes to emerge from data (Glaser, 1978). This helps avoid the analysis being guided by the existing theoretical framework or any potential subjective bias. For instance, all potential core concepts/categories were confirmed repeatedly by comparing the emerging themes with new data collected in subsequent interviews. If a category or a property of a category belonged solely to the researcher, and was not a part of the world being investigated as I did in the initial stage of open coding, it was proved to have no meaning for the interviewees and had to be discarded in further analysis.

“Work” suggests that “a theory should be able to explain what happened, predict what will happen and interpret what is happening in the area of substantive inquiry” (Glaser, 1978, p.4). In other words, the resulting theory from grounded theory is likely to be empirically valid if it can explain and predict the phenomenon under study. The credibility of a theory is likely to be high if the theory-building process is intimately tied with evidence. It is very likely that the resulting theory will be consistent with empirical observation on “how they feel, smell, and seen” (p.25). This intimate interaction with data produces theory that closely mirrors reality; thus, provide high level of credibility and trustworthiness. In the present study, the emerging theory mirrored the realistic VCTs experienced by the Chinese managers.
Therefore, the resulting typology of VCTs and the characteristics in relation to the theory is likely to be able to predict the similar VCT experiences in the future.

In short, the grounded theory, as a method committed to allowing theory to emerge from the data, lends itself to showing the relationship between theory-building research process and the theory it produces (Glaser, 1978, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Torraco, 2002, 2004). Therefore, the grounded theory as the research method employed for the current study provided a means of tracing the researcher’s theory-building strategies as they took shape, and ultimately gave rise to a theoretical product. This did add transparency and credibility to the created theory.

**Verification**

Even though the grounded theory method is focused on generating local knowledge and is highly contextual, the theory that emerges is likely to be testable with constructs that can be readily measured, and hypotheses/propositions that can be tested (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The measurable constructs are likely because they have already been measured and tested many times during the theory building process. The hypotheses/propositions are likely to be verifiable because they have already undergone repeated verification during the same process. The high transparency of the research process demonstrated in the final presentation of a typical grounded theory makes it easy to be verified. As presented later, all propositions derived in the theoretical coding process as part of the resulting theory can be tested through quantitative studies in the future research.

**The Rigor of Qualitative Method**

Although the founders of grounded theory argue that the high transparency of the research process enhances the credibility of grounded theory research, it is still challenged on how to explicitly establish the credibility and auditability (Dey, 1999;
Egan, 2002). Dey (1999) emphasizes that when assessing grounded theory, it is important to consider consistency with other theories and to elaborate specifically on potential errors, ambiguities, and explanations in the analysis. Therefore, the following methods were used to maintain the credibility and auditability of this study: (1) member validation, (2) triangulation, and (3) reflexivity.

**Member validation.** Seale (1999) mentioned that all criteria developed for qualitative studies, to one extent or another, rely on presenting the results to those who were studied, asking them whether they agree with the analysis. This approach of improving internal consistency is also called “member validation” (Sandelowski, 1993).

However, while conducting member validation, the researcher may not always agree with the research participants. As social science researchers, we have access to other data, knowledge, research findings, theories, and understanding of similar or contrasting situations. Our analytic eye and disciplinary background may also lead us to look at the participants’ statements and actions in ways that may not have occurred to them (Charmas, 2006).

Nevertheless, in seeking to explaining the basic psychosocial processes, the resulting theory of grounded theory needs to have “fit and grab” for informants (Cutcliffe, 2005, p.425). Therefore, member checking with the research participants adapted for this study included (1) sending the interview transcripts to each participant to confirm the accuracy, and (2) checking with participants on their feedback on major findings and propositional statements for validation. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Triangulation.** Merriam (2001) suggests that triangulation (i.e., multiple investigators/sources of data/methods) is a good strategy to enhance the credibility
and objectivity of qualitative research. The triangulation was performed at two levels. First, I triangulated data by using multiple data sources. For instance, my data collection included interviews and observations. Information derived from interview conversations was checked against my observations captured in field notes as another source (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which eventually contributed to a meaningful understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Second, as suggested by Patton (1999), “having two or more researchers independently analyze the same qualitative data set and then compare their findings provides an important check on selective perception and blind interpretive bias” (p.1195). Following these recommendations, Three researchers were engaged in the open coding process to maintain the credibility of the study. Each of them independently completed the open coding on four to seven transcripts based on their understanding. I then compared each conceptual label with theirs and communicated potential discrepancies with them. The final codes were adjusted accordingly.

**Reflexivity.** Reflexivity is a concept used in social science to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the topic of research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Reflexivity in research involves “being aware in the moment of what is influencing the researcher’s internal and external response while simultaneously being aware of the researcher’s relationship to the research topic and the participants” (Dowling, 2006). Through reflexivity, the researcher may acknowledge the existence of researcher bias or potential subjectivity that are likely to influence the research outcome and explicitly demonstrate the researcher’s role as an instrument within the research process, thus increasing the transparency and credibility of the study.

Reflexive research has two attributes: careful interpretation and reflection (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; p. 5). The first implies that all references, trivial or
non-trivial, on a research subject, are the results of interpretations referring to reality. It thus calls for the utmost awareness of the theoretical assumptions and the importance of pre-understanding of the phenomenon. The second attribute, reflection, emphasizes inwardness towards the researchers and their related experiences. According to the reflexive approach, research is fundamentally an interpretive activity (Alvesson, 2003). Consequently, research is regarded as a joint product of the participants, the researcher, and their interactions. For the research to be credible and objective, it is vital for researchers to find ways to analyze how subjective and intersubjective elements influence their research (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity was used in this study as an analytical tool to reach this goal (Alvesson, 2003; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). It was employed during the following stages of the study.

Reflexivity at pre-research stage. In the beginning of the research, I reflected on my experience, expertise, and preconceived ideas in relation to career transition, both as an external researcher and an internal HRD professional. In the internal role, I was a former Chinese manager and have experienced several career transitions in the past ten years. Seven years ago, I changed my career from an HR consultant to an educational administrator focusing on career development. Then, I changed my career again from a career development professional to an academician. I have been influenced by some Western career theories during my own career transitions, such as social cognitive theory and person-job matching theory. As a career development professional, I learned in numerous career counseling sessions with MBA students and managers that Chinese managers were facing unparalleled career opportunities with unprecedented frustrations. I found existing career theories rooted in the West were not sufficient to explain or solve the career problems Chinese managers had. These experiences and ideas as my internal role have undoubtedly reinforced my
research interest in, and sensitivity to, the phenomenon under investigation. These also allowed me to approach sources of data with much convenience.

However, as a researcher, especially a grounded theory researcher, I need to “bracket” (Ahern, 1999) or suspend all biased opinions and beliefs I may have regarding the phenomenon being studied until a conceptual framework emerges. Therefore, it was important for me as a researcher to be alert to the following issues: (1) avoid projecting my own feelings or experience to the data collected and (2) prevent the influence of my former role as a career redevelopment professional while collecting and analyzing data. This reflection and reflexive analysis prior to the study helped me reduce my subjectivity and potential bias in the research process.

**Reflexivity during data collection and analysis.** In grounded theory research, data collection and analysis take place at the same time. The reflexivity in this process is vital for the credibility of the final product – the emerging theory. The grounded theory approach has provided a good resource to maintain reflexivity throughout the data gathering and analyzing process. It is the memoing process. “Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding” (Glaser, 1978, p.83). “The point of memos is to record ideas, get them out, and the analyst should do so in any kind of language” (p.85). Given this momentarily recorded product, it is not difficult to trace a researcher’s objectivity of the analysis. Particularly, reflexivity in the analysis process was to ask myself constantly whether the codes (categories) and their relationships were truly rooted in theoretical comparison and analysis of data instead of my preconceived framework.
Assumptions and Other Issues influencing the Study

Assumptions

The phenomenon of VCTs is commonly viewed as an individual behavior (e.g., Brown, 1995; Hanson, 1996; Herr, 2001; Super, 1957, 1963). However, any career transition decision is made in concert with others, such as spouses, friends or professional colleagues, and is influenced by the macro-socioeconomic context. Few make a career transition in isolation to their environment. Thus, my first assumption is that career transition is a complex social process involving individuals, organizations, and societal environment. This process is of consolidation and interactions between extrinsic and intrinsic variables which together form the ultimate product - change. The individual is the change agent to transform all the influences and interactions into final action.

Derived from the assumption above, my second assumption is that there are no simplistic causal relationships determining individuals’ career transition. In other words, the complexity of career transition and related decision making by individuals cannot be captured simply by examining a few variables.

Language Issue

The present study was analyzed and conceptualized in English language, but the data collection was recorded in Chinese language. This presents a challenge when it is necessary to translate interview transcripts into English for triangulating with other researchers for their checks on the selective perception and blind interpretive bias. Specifically, the researcher frequently concerns with the lack of similarity in conceptual meanings of similar words from culture to culture (Patton, 2002). In fact, a second language concern is the inability to translate certain words or phrases. Words
have been introduced into language that simply has no meaning outside of the cultural context where they are found (Patton, 2002).

In order to improve the validity and reliability of translation, I translated for meaning instead of word-for-word. I strived to keep the rendering as consistent as possible while still conceiving the meaning of the original message. Other than the proofreading from two bilingual researchers, I also sent my translated transcripts and my open codes to bilingual participants for member checking from the language perspective.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the qualitative research methodology and grounded theory approach that was employed to answer the proposed research questions for this study. The rationale for the methodological approach has been presented. The research design, data collection, and analysis procedures of the study have been described in detail. The issue of methodological rigor and credibility of the study has been addressed. The chapter concluded with a discussion on the assumptions and language issue influencing the study.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS FROM OPEN CODING

This chapter reports the findings from open coding of the data in exploring career transitions of managers in the Chinese context. The semi-structured interviews generated rich data related to the central topic of this study. The purpose of this chapter is to provide descriptive findings related to the research questions primarily through excerpts from interview transcripts. The reporting of data includes: (1) an overview of the interview participants, (2) a coding scheme, and (3) a presentation of the major findings based on thematic categories and concepts which emerged from the data. Tables are used to report major themes under each coding category. Direct quotes from interviews are italicized, indented, and single-spaced. They are further differentiated by participant and coding strip numbers. These numbers were used to sequence text in each interview and help locate and track data and organize transcripts.

Overview of the Research Participants

I conducted a total of 22 interviews on two trips to China. I interviewed nine managers in January 2009 during a conference trip. The remaining interviews were conducted in June 2010. All interviewees were from Beijing.
**Sample Description**

Of the 22 Chinese managers interviewed, 12 were male and 10 were female. All except one were married and eighteen had one child due to China’s birth control policy. The age of the interviewees ranged from 30 to 45. Their most recent career transitions took place between the ages of 28 and 43. These managers were highly educated with a minimum of four-year college degree and ten held a master’s or MBA degree. They were Chinese-born citizens of People’s Republic of China. Table 2 presents a brief description of the 22 interview participants, including names (altered to protect their identity), number of career transitions, age, gender, marital status, education background, and career history at the time of the interview.

Table 2

*Description of research participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>No. of CT</th>
<th>Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female, age 35, married. She has a MA in human resource management from a top business school in China. She quit her job as HR director two years prior from a private manufacturing company and established her own internet-based career consulting business. This was her second career transition. The first one was from a foreign telecommunication company to a private company after only one year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheng</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male, age 42, married. He holds a bachelor’s degree in finance. He was a project manager in a startup investment company at the time of the interview. He quit his job from a large state owned wholesale company after eight years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Previous Experience</th>
<th>Current Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Male, age 37, single. He was a Chief Representative of a foreign-owned telecommunication company at the time of the interview. After receiving his MBA, he first worked in two leading state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for five years. He then worked for a multinational for two years and then joined another SOE as an operations manager for three years. He began working for his current employer after the failure of his own equipment supply business.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Male, age 35, married with a Bachelor’s degree in construction. He was a director in a private IT company specializing in corporate operations data security at the time of the interview. His previous position was senior product manager in a data communications company three years ago. He has had twice career transitions, both in the IT industry.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Male, age 36, married. He holds a bachelor’s degree. He was an HR director with an IT company at the time of the interview. Previously, he worked in a large private IT company for 8 years, and was promoted twice, from an HR specialist to an HR manager of a business unit (BU), and to deputy general manager of Corporate HR. He moved to his current position a year ago prior to the interview.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Female, age 43, married. She has an MBA degree and was the chief financial controller in a NASDAQ-listed IT company at the time of the interview. She had worked for a joint venture company as VP of finance for 5 years before joined this company. Prior to that, she worked for a Hong Kong-based state owned investment group company for 5 years.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Female, age 38, married. She obtained a bachelor’s degree in accounting. She was a controller of a private data security technology company at the time of the interview. She had worked for two manufacturing multinationals for 2 and 4 years, respectively, before joining her current company.</td>
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</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Role and Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>HR director of a large family business headquartered in Singapore at the time of the interview. Previously, he had worked for a multinational for 12 years and was progressively promoted to vice president of HR. During that period, he was also assigned to a business unit as director of business development for two years prior to his most recent career transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wen</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>Independent consultant at the time of the interview. Prior to that, he was a senior HR consultant at a multinational consulting firm for two years. He had also worked for two other multinationals in different industries as HR manager and HR director. He started his career with a brief stint at a state owned institute after college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Supervisor of 15 employees as a manager of executive search in an HR consulting firm for three years at the time of the interview. Prior to that, she worked for a multinational in fast-moving consumer goods industry for ten years and was eventually promoted to HR manager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Vice president of operations with a leading SOE in telecommunications at the time of the interview. He was a vice president in a private company in automation industry for three years prior to the most recent career transition. Previously, he had been a middle manager in a multinational for eight years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Independent training consultant at the time of the interview. Yu used to be a deputy general manager of HR of a shipping multinational for four years and a consulting manager of another multinational for 5 years. He started his career as a clerk in a major SOE after college.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Education and Career History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hang</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MBA, Director of marketing and sales at a private investment firm for two years at the time of the interview. Prior to that, he worked in a multinational. He started his career as an engineer in a local SOE for eight years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rong</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in accounting, Administrative and accounting manager at a private advertising company at the time of the interview. She worked for a SOE for 13 years and a private company and a multinational.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MBA, In the process of starting a new business with two partners. Prior to that, he worked for a private IT company for three years and was promoted to marketing director. He worked for three other IT companies, but his tenure never lasted more than a year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree, Vice president with a consulting firm. She worked for a small private HR consulting firm for three years and was promoted to partner and vice president. She worked as a HR clerk in a manufacturing SOE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MBA, Manager of public relations at a private real estate company. After college, she started her career as a journalist and worked in management positions at three different multinationals. She started her own web-based IT service company in 2005.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued on next page)
Table 2 (continued)

Zheng  3  Female, age 45, married. She has a bachelor degree and was manager of technology in a giant telecommunications SOE at the time of the interview. Before that, she worked for another telecommunication company as a data center manager for two years. She also worked in the Beijing office of a multinational for two years and a state research institute for eight years.

Yong  2  Male, age 30, Married with an MBA degree, Yong was a section chief in a giant oil SOE for two years at the time of the interview. Before that, he was a finance manager at another SOE after he obtained his MBA degree. He also worked in a local government office for four years after college.

Jesse  5  Male, age 39, Married with a MBA from a non-Chinese university. He was an independent training consultant at the time of the interview. He worked for a multinational for five years before pursuing an MBA overseas. Upon returning, he became HR manager of a private firm for a year and did the same in an education firm for another year. Then he went back to his former multinational as a training project manager for two years. He later joined a private fitness company as a vice president for about a year.

Lindsey  3  Female, age 45, married. She has a bachelor's degree and was the head of China branch office of a manufacturing multinational. Prior to that, she was senior manager of strategy in a different multinational for nine years. She worked for another multinational company for a year after working for an SOE for seven years previously.

Susan  3  Female, age 43, married with an MBA degree, Susan was a director of a top multinational marketing research consulting firm. She was a journalist for a state owned magazine for many years after college. Upon receiving MBA degree, she joined a private consulting firm at age 34. Three years later, she went to a multinational consulting firm and stayed for 2 years.

Table 2 also showed that sixteen out of the twenty-two interviewees had reported at least one career transition between organizations of different ownership.
systems, either from a state owned enterprise (SOE) to a private-owned enterprise (POE), or from a multi-national company (MNC) to a POE. Eighteen had experienced career transitions across industries, and seven had changed their professions during the most recent career transitions. During the interviews, nine of the managers shared their multiple career transition experiences.

**Managerial experience.** The managers had between 7 and 21 years of work experience at the time of the interviews. Sixteen held middle to senior managerial positions with such job titles as managers, directors, or vice presidents. Four owned their businesses and two were independent consultants at the time of the interviews. Their managerial functions covered business operations, human resource management, finance and accounting, auditing, marketing and sales, business development, technology, and government relations. The participants had a wide variety of career experiences in different industries, including automation, consulting, electronics, entertainment, IT, manufacturing, shipping and transportation, telecommunications, and wholesale. Additionally, they had experienced different ownership systems. At the time of the interviews, three were working for SOEs, four were in MNCs and thirteen in POEs including four entrepreneurs who started their own businesses.

**Managers’ Career Transition Environment**

In general, the interviewees’ career experiences spanned two decades from 1989 to 2009. This is a period that witnessed the rapid changes in the following areas in China: (1) College graduates were no longer assigned lifelong jobs by the central planning system; (2) POEs were no longer restricted by the Chinese government and
became a major contributor of production and employment, and (3) Chinese government encouraged MNCs and joint venture businesses to set up operations. These social and organizational changes put an end to the lifelong jobs with high security and little mobility that the Chinese referred to as the “iron rice bowl.” They also created new possibilities for individuals to pursue careers based on personal interest and aspiration (Sun & Wang, 2009).

With the backdrop of tremendous turmoil in the Chinese job market, all interviewees made career transitions between the ages of 28 and 43. Seven of the interviewees in their 40s were given government job assignments immediately after college and started their careers with an SOE. Overall, all managers changed careers at least once with some having as many as five career transitions. On average, the interviewees made a career transition every seven years. Furthermore, most of the career transitions took place between 1999 and 2009, implying that career transitions occurred every four years during that ten-year period.

While 13 participants shared only their most recent career transition experience, the remaining nine managers also shared some of their other career transition experiences during the interviews. Altogether there were forty career transitions recorded during the interviews.

**The Coding Scheme**

Major categories reported in this chapter were generated from open coding. They are (1) Dissonance with the environment, (2) Personal Aspirations, (3) Career Transition Process, and (4) Career Transition Outcomes. These categories emerged
from open coding of the interview transcripts, relevant field notes and field observations. Open coding and constant comparative analysis of grounded theory method were employed consistently to make sense of the 426 pages of data generated from the interviews.

A code is an abbreviation used to identify a strip of data as belonging to a theoretical category (Glaser, 1998). Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) inductive approach suggests that codes emerge from the data and are later organized into concepts and core categories. Following the inductive approach, I coded the data strips of interview transcripts using an open coding method that generated 595 substantive codes. Two English speaking scholars and a bilingual HRD scholar were involved in the open coding process. Each of them independently coded four to seven transcripts and then compared their open codes with mine. After discussing some discrepancies in codes, we reached consensus on final codes.

All open codes were organized into different concepts and categories based on their properties or attributes reported in Table 3. According to Glaser (1998), data may be coded in different ways in order to generate as many meaningful codes as possible during the open coding process. Thus, I coded the data strips using different schemes. Since each data strip may appear more than once, the total number of data strips in Table 3 is 4,333, which is greater than the actual number of the strips, 3,843. A sample of organized data analysis, including core categories, concepts, properties and dimensions, and data strips is presented in Appendix E.
Table 3

**Categories and Concepts: Distribution of Open Codes and Data Strips**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Open Codes</th>
<th>No. of Data Strips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dissonance with the environment</td>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological Contract</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship with Direct Boss</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job Characteristics</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Industry Constraints</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>154</strong></td>
<td><strong>1366</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Aspiration</td>
<td>Career exploration</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career repositioning</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career advancement</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>743</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Transition Process</td>
<td>Decision to quit</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career planning</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External opportunities</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career choice</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assimilation into the new role</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>225</strong></td>
<td><strong>1625</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome of Career Transition</td>
<td>Tangible outcomes</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intangible outcomes</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>145</strong></td>
<td><strong>599</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>595</strong></td>
<td><strong>4333</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dissonance with the Environment

The phenomenon of managerial career transitions in China has been accruing in an economic environment of rapid change and growth encompasses all organizations, industries, and ownership systems. The changes have created much dissonance between the managers and the external environment and encouraged career transitions. Five concepts under this category were found that led to the managers’ reduced organizational commitment and job satisfaction, thus triggering their career transition decisions. They include organizational culture, psychological contract, relationships with direct supervisor, job characteristics, and industry constraints. Table 4 summarizes the concepts and their properties, and the frequency of their occurrence among all the transcripts.

Organizational culture

From prior work and managerial experiences, the interviewees appeared to have developed their own professional values, which, at times, were different from those of their current employers. Comparing the values of their organization with their own values through daily interactions, they may realize that they disagree with the values of their organizations. Perceived disjuncture with organizational culture and related norms and values appeared to serve as a direct or indirect trigger for a number of managers’ career transitions. For example, Power recalled an event due to which he determined his disjuncture in values with his employer, a large SOE:
Table 4

*Dissonance with the Environment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Properties and Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Culture</td>
<td>• Organizational Norms and values (89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership style (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Informal culture (72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Evolving culture conflict (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• SOE system culture (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Contract</td>
<td>• Organizational change induced violation (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ownership switch (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Restructuring (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Business obstacles (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Procedural and distributive injustice induced violation (61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Policy consistency (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perceived unfair treatment (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Perceived unfair treatment to others (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with Direct Supervisor</td>
<td>• Disagreement/Conflict (93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Management change (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Loyalty to the direct supervisor (87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Characteristics</td>
<td>• Scope of the job (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• (Mis)matching with the personal attributes (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The meaningfulness of the job (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Development opportunities (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Development Stage (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry Constraints</td>
<td>• Industry reshuffling (28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Industry threats (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Government policy (25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was just after the Chinese New Year in 2005, the busiest season for us. But we had to attend an employee representative meeting ordered by the headquarters. All employee representatives had to attend, including all of my sales teams. I was the chair of the Workers’ Union at that time. I had to sit on the stage in front of all the representatives for the whole day for nothing … No, I was not a speaker, but was required to sit there. All speeches had been pre-printed and distributed to every attendee. But you still had to sit there and listen to the speakers. I thought it was a waste of my life in such a bureaucratic organization (Power, 020)!

This was when Power was in charge of a service delivery department, a core department in a SOE in telecommunications with 50 employees. Power felt powerless and that he was wasting his life during such events. But as the Union Chair and a role model, he had to play this role as defined by the SOE system. He further described the culture in the following way:

In SOEs, meetings were not meant to be productive and solve problems, but to “keep yourself out of political troubles”. Relationships were more important than job performance. So managers were not motivated to perform, they only cared about opportunities to make themselves look good in front of their bosses (Power, 037).

Clearly, Power believed that in a bureaucratic environment, managers were not motivated to perform, and being successful was not always performance contingent. Later on, his perceived bureaucracy and lacking of efficiency was confirmed by a communication with one of his peers that further influenced his transition.

I chatted with a colleague who worked at the headquarters. We talked about the inefficiency of the meetings and other bureaucratic practices. Both of us were disappointed. It was a feeling of oppression (Power, 025).

Sometimes the dissonance with the organizational culture also brought a role conflict between what the managers were supposed to do as defined by the position and their behavior guided by personal values, as occurred to Cindy with her former employer in a POE:

The management only cared about productivity, not average employees.
For instance, the workers were scheduled to work 24 hours in two shifts. I asked them to cut shift hours because workers need to rest. But they said the machine could not be stopped and shortening shifts would hurt productivity. (Cindy, 039)... By doing this, there would be more injuries and morale would suffer. I had to take care of all employees, not just for a particular power group. I needed to protect employees as well (Cindy, 042).

She was working in a large manufacturing company that quickly expanded to become the number one in the nation through acquisitions and mergers.

A few managers from private companies also echoed their disagreement with their organizational cultures. Jesse complained about leadership style he experienced:

You would not feel respected by the top management. It was the entire corporate culture. As a senior HR manager, I was often ordered by the executives to fire an employee immediately, not only junior employees but even to senior managers (Jesse, 011).

Yu shared a similar experience about leadership style at a European-based multinational.

It was like a family business. The ‘old emperor’ still dominated the company. It was absolutely a top-down culture. If our boss decided to do things in a certain way, we just had to shut up and do it! It was like ‘their way or the highway’. (Yu, , 016)...Every general manager was just like a captain, they were even being called captains. I was disappointed by the culture because I did not like following orders blindly. I have my way of thinking. But I could hardly do things my way when I worked there (Yu, 020).

Frequently, organizations’ informal culture, although not as explicit as organizational procedures and policies, may influence managers’ motivation and perceived career development opportunity. Informal culture is less tangible, but more enduring than its formal counterpart (Barnes, 1995). It is often the interplay of operator subcultures (Schein, 2010). Helen described her perceived influence of the informal culture in her previous organization:
I learned the company’s rules in a year. The key positions belonged to people trained and developed internally. In other words, if you started your career elsewhere, you won’t be promoted to key positions. For example, my boss was extremely competent, with a good reputation. When he competed with another person who was trained by CAF (an internal training program preparing for high potentials) for the CFO position, many people preferred my boss. But I knew from the very beginning that he would lose simply because he was not from the CAF and he did lose (Helen, 039).

Therefore, she predicted her own career in the organization before the recent transition:

For me, the highest position I could expect for my career would be a senior manager (SM). Only under extreme circumstances would I go further. Our performance was undervalued. We were hired just to help developing their own people (Helen, 040).

Previously an auditing manager with a large SOE, Rong articulated a case where the organization culture would not allow her to select her team members.

When I was promoted to a division manager, I wanted to significantly improve my division’s performance. Two of my subordinates were non-performers with bad reputations in the whole organization. I wanted to remove one of them from my team, and consulted with a colleague before making a proposal to my boss. But my colleague challenged me. “Why can’t you stand him? He is no good, but why you are the only manager who can’t stand him and wants to kick him out?” I almost cried out when I heard this (Rong, 105).

In some SOEs, managers had limited authority to choose team members and were not allowed to dismiss anyone. This system of “iron-rice-bowl” was described by a popular saying in Rong’s following quote:

The company is owned by the state, not by you or me. Why bother care about it? (Rong, 106)

Gong shared how disappointed he was about the previous company’s culture, especially after a failed business deal due to perceived slow responses of corporate bureaucratic process of the MNC he was working for.
It failed because nobody in the upper management was willing to take responsibilities. The whole system did not support them to take responsibility. They just wanted headquarters to be happy and kept everything under control, even sacrificing efficiency. You knew projects could not move ahead because there was nobody making a decision (Gong, 037).

Jesse expressed his disappointment when tried to change the organizational culture:

*I don’t think I could do better if I go back to that place. I found that as a professional manager, it was impossible to change a POE’s culture even if you were the CEO. You can’t change a system, a team of 600 to 700 people* (Jesse, 084).

He further explained the difficulties he faced and shared his failing attempt to changing the culture by recruiting new managers from MNCs to the POE:

*In MNCs, I knew how to communicate about improvement. But here, they wouldn’t know what you were talking about* (Jesse, 085). *I had tried to recruit more people from MNCs for a change. But those people wouldn’t be able to stay long* (Jesse, 086).

Apparently, culture conflict induced career transitions were experienced by managers in all types of organizational ownership systems.

Through the interviewees’ narrative descriptions, I also found that the culture conflict had been developed over time. Cindy’s experience demonstrated this well. She recalled her feelings about her new job when she was hired five years ago before the most recent career transition.

*I was 27 at the time and was both excited and nervous about the new job* (Cindy, 007)... *I totally focused on the job tasks thinking day and night about how to achieve my work goals step by step* (Cindy, 009). *I never thought of leaving the company one day* (Cindy, 010).

As latecomers, managers usually do not pay much attention to the implicit organizational rules when they start their new positions. However, over time both
consonance and dissonance of individuals with the organizational culture may develop. Those with more seniority are more likely to accept the culture because they helped shape the norms and values of their organization or have grown accustomed to its culture. In contrast, newcomers are more likely to have problems fitting in.

As the youngest director at age 27, and the only one with a master’s degree, Cindy was surrounded by managers mostly in their 40s. The majority of the management team had a military background and had worked together with the general manager for a long time. According to Cindy, they often joked with her:

>We are ‘brigands’; we are fighters, not like you (Cindy, 017).

Gradually, the dissonance between Cindy and the organizational culture emerge and triggered her ultimate departure from the organization.

It was interesting that those who experienced career transitions from SOEs generalized their perceptions toward overall SOE culture and related cultural conflicts. The following lists some general perceptions from the interviewees.

*In SOEs, job performance is not the first priority, but getting promoted is* (Power, 017).

*Well, the problem was that I could hardly see my future there in the SOE system. I mean the lack of opportunities for promotion. Section Chiefs were all very young. (Ling, 019) You know if they do not retire, nobody could replace them. I’m sure you know the SOE stuff (Ling, 020).*

*The ineffective meetings and the endless wrangling with each other…it was just not the right environment to get things done in SOEs (Power, 079).*

*I would do much better in FOEs, because I would not be involved in so much politics. It would be a lot easier in communication in daily work in a FOE (Harry, 259).*
I do not know if I can stand any more SOEs. It means nothing to do all day long with a cup of tea, a newspaper and chatting till the end of the day (Susan, 090). You have to deal with gossip and rumors. I bet I would like to get out if I were still in the system (Susan, 091).

These perceptions were indeed consistent with my personal experience working at an SOE in the mid-1990s. Personal observation shows that managers who were promoted were usually not the best performers, but those who had good relationship with their supervisors.

**Psychological Contract**

Psychological contract refers to an individual’s beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the person and another party (Rousseau, 1989). A violation of psychological contract occurs when one party in a relationship perceives the other failed to fulfill its obligations (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Two sub-categories of psychological contract related issues between career transitioning managers and their employers emerged from the data that affected their job satisfaction and organizational commitment, thus directly or indirectly caused their voluntary career transitions. They are: (1) organizational change induced violation and (2) procedural and distributive injustice induced violation.

Drastic socioeconomic transformation in China caused numerous organizations to experience downsizing, restructuring, and change of ownership in the past three decades. Such changes caused organizations to alter related psychological contracts with a number of managers interviewed. From managers’ perspectives, their career paths were altered, totally or in part, due to changes in organizations so that the paths of advancement became uncertain. Even when the career paths were stable,
signs of slowing progress or “standstill” had influenced their job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Sheng described this situation in the SOE he once worked for:

*The company was in the process of a transformation from a SOE to a POE. The bad thing was that they divided the company’s assets into several pieces and merged them with different companies. Clearly the company was losing its key competencies and resources* (Sheng, 010).

Although he remained vice president, Sheng realized that the company would not able to keep what it had promised him because it no longer has its competitive edge.

*The company could hardly survive. I knew it was pointless to wait for what they have promised me and to stay on this sinking boat!* (Sheng, 025).

In a similar vein, Ling recalled her uncertain situation before her first career transition.

*Also that SOE was trying to sell its properties and its buildings were to be torn down and rebuilt. It was said an MNC would acquire it and the property would change hands after that. Nobody knew where the company would be headed after the acquisition* (Ling, 017).

Worse yet, unexpected business obstacles may also change managers’ view on psychological contract with the organization, such as the example offered by Ying:

*I was promised that the company would go public before I joined* (Ying, 010). But they screwed up on a key venture capital deal and missed the *IPO opportunity* (Ying, 011). Then we moved from a big office to a smaller one and downsized the workforce by almost 30 percent (Ying, 012).

In this private company, unstable revenues made it difficult for managers to develop organizational trust. Ying was one of them who quit from a vice president position after two years.
Organization restructuring was also found to be a source of psychological contract violation that triggered career transition as articulated by Power.

In August 2005, our company started a process of restructuring, becoming a part of a giant business group. I could see I’d lose career opportunities and I didn’t want to be part of it (Power, 022).

The second category of psychological contract violation was related to perceived procedural and distributive injustice. First, policy consistency was found to be critical in influencing managers’ perceived psychological contract and related organization commitment. Xi was a product manager successful and satisfied in an organization experiencing a drastic change of internal rules until a change in internal policy. He was in a key position for new MP3 product marketing and successfully implemented the marketing plan and helped his company establish its leading position in the local market. His team generated most profit within the company. He had been loyal to the company because he believed it had shaped his career and success, as he put it,

Without working in this company, my life would be meaningless (Xi, 030).

However, a subsequent internal policy change triggered his career transition.

In 2005, the boss created a new rule called “virtuous competition” that allowed all other business units (BUs) to launch MP3 products, targeting different markets and competing internally with each other. You know that other BUs had been envious of our accomplishments for a long time. They all entered the MP3 markets, competing with my team. You know, the marketing and channel resources were limited. Every BU had to look for its own marketing and sales channels. It was so stupid to waste these resources and compete internally! We ruined ourselves in the market. (Xi, 068)

From Xi’s perspective, the company broke a psychological contract by changing the internal rules of the game. He expected more support and promotion in
return to his contributions. Yet the company responded with internal competition and reduced support and resources. Poorly-communicated changes in internal policies and rules ruined good faith and perception of fair dealing. Consequently, the manager was deeply disappointed and felt deceived and betrayed and ultimately ended the employment relationship.

Perceived unfair treatment was also found to be a type of psychological contract violation. Rong rose through the ranks of her SOE far more quickly than her peers. In this organization, a key explicit performance measure of the managers was the number of publications on interpreting and explaining state tax regulations.

\[\text{I consistently published more than others. My case analyses were always considered examples for the whole auditing firm. I was always assigned to the most difficult projects because my boss always had confidence in me. But I did not get rewarded for my performance (Rong, 061)... I was told that it was to maintain an internal balance [to avoid arousing other's envy] (Rong, 087).}\]

Rong began to consider leaving because she thought this was unfair. Susan also shared an experience that led to her subsequent career transition.

\[\text{My boss and I defined my performance goals differently. For instance, some tasks were included in my goals defined at the beginning of the year but my boss mentioned some additional ones, such as publishing media reports, and included them in my performance goals...No, it was not in writing. By the end of the year, he used this to evaluate my performance, but ignored other mutually agreed goals that I had successfully achieved. I was quite upset about the evaluation result (Susan, 070).}\]

Managers sometimes evaluated the organization’s handling of psychological contracts by observing how their peers were treated. Ling had been a vice president and one of the three partners at a POE and owned a portion of its shares.

\[\text{...my income was not bad at all. I had company shares, and I received dividend payment every 6 months in addition to my base salary (Ling,}\]
Plus, my boss trusted me, and I was able to successfully accomplish tasks I was given. Also, I recruited 80 percent of the current employees. I felt like the company was my family, you know. We built up the company together, and shared ups and downs (Ling, 042)

Obviously, she had high level of loyalty to the organization as she put it:

*I was thinking about staying there forever* (Ling, 095)

However, an event changed her perception to the company. One day she learned that the other vice president (VP) was forced to resign because profit from his division fell. She was astonished by the CEO’s decision and felt it was unfair to the VP.

*I knew that VP’s performance wasn’t as good, hardly broke even, because of the new market. But if the boss respected us as partners, he should have discussed with us first to find out a solution. But he did not; he fired the VP directly not even bother to inform me beforehand and settled all his shares immediately* (Ling, 045).

She described how she felt then:

*I was shocked* (Ling, 046)… *I was thinking, all right, I was still bringing in revenues and making money for the company. But what if the business started decline? When that happens, the next person to let go would be me* (Ling, 047).

After the event, Ling no longer trusted her boss. She felt hurt (Ling, 055) and changed her perceptions of her boss and her organization. It became the key reason for her leaving in spite of suffering significant loss of benefits.

*I thought about leaving for some time, probably a month. I had to give up lots of things if I leave* (Ling, 059)… *not only because of the shares, also because the company was in a process of negotiating a foreign joint venture* (Ling, 060), *also the office was so close to my home, and my daughter was still young and needed my attention…*(Ling, 061).

As mentioned above, Ying also experienced similar situation in a POE. She expressed as the following:

*My previous general manager in the technology department was very competent. He was fired not because of his performance, but because the
management changed business strategy. He became a scapegoat for the old strategy. They made up an excuse and fired him. No honest person would accept it (Ying, 002)... It made me feel I could be the next, and I felt no future there (Ying, 004).

The violation of psychological contract was found in both SOEs and POEs. It seems to be less of a concern for managers of MNCs.

**Relationship with Direct Supervisor**

Sample data strongly suggests that in comparison with organizational culture and psychological contract related causes, the relationships with direct supervisors were often more forceful in accelerating the managers’ career transition process. Sheng and Tong coincidentally quoted a same popular saying among Chinese managers to express their perception of the importance of this category:

*You join a company because of its reputation; you leave a company because of your supervisor* (Sheng, 066, Tong, 073).

Disjuncture with one’s direct supervisor could be accelerated by critical events. Mary had a conflict event with her supervisor that caused her career transition took place in as little as three months. She was director of government relations (GR) of a US-based MNC’s China operations. As one of the high-performing managers, she loved her job and had been proud of her performance. Her supervisor was the general manager in charge of the overall China operations and reported to headquarters. He was supportive of her until that event:

*Everything seemed to be perfect before the event happened* (Mary 044).
*I received a global communications award soon after I joined the company, which had not been awarded to an employee in our China branch for the past twenty years. Later, I led a team for a communications project and got another major award* (Mary, 045). *My boss praised me on various occasions* (Mary, 046). *I was so excited about my job* (Mary, 065).
Mary had a good relationship with her boss:

*I liked my boss’ style. He was very direct and honest, never hid his opinions* (Marry, 033). *Not everybody liked him, but I did ...* (Marry, 034). He was quite supportive of me. In many cases, when I made a point, he would nod, *Then I just went ahead and a dream came true* (Marry, 035).

However, she lost his support over night as a result of a conflict.

*This was the first time I confronted him. It was a big GR event. I told him directly that his plan was not realistic in China and could not be implemented... He was very angry with me* (Mary, 048)... *At the end of the event, he appreciated everyone including all administrative support but purposely ignored me, even though I was the key planner and organizer of the event* (Mary, 049). *I ran out of the event site and burst into tears. I knew it was his way to tell me, “Don’t challenge my authority!” But I was just telling the truth* (Mary, 050)!

After that, she felt singled out and ignored by her supervisor. Even though she was not let go, it seemed to her that she would never be assigned any important project or be given development opportunities. She resigned within three months and joined another company.

In some Chinese organizations, “*the company’s culture is simply the leader’s culture*” (Sheng, 047). Therefore, if the direct boss is in charge the whole company, the disjuncture with the supervisor often reflects the disjuncture between the manager and the organizational culture. Sheng previously worked in an SOE and commented on his supervisor in the following way.

*Growing up in the state-owned system, he had no idea of market competition. His leadership style was ok for the centrally-planned system, but not suitable for a market economy. He caused many confusion and frustration in operations.* (Sheng, 096)

The disjuncture with supervisors was also found for managers working in POEs. Cindy expressed disagreement with her supervisor that triggered her departure from the company.
I realized that I had different opinions and approaches on HR policies. I didn’t think he (my boss) was right. Sometimes I just couldn’t follow his directions. He was not happy about this and confronted me twice (Cindy, 058)

Sometimes the disjuncture with direct supervisors might also be caused by changes in management teams. When managers got used to working with their previous boss, a change in their reporting line or replacement of their supervisors, they may have difficulty adjusting to the new managers and their leadership style and this will adversely influence their trust, performance and job satisfaction. Sharon articulated her unusual interactions with her new supervisor, who was assigned by the headquarters in French:

I found it was a bit difficult communicating with her. No, not the language issue (Sharon, 012). I thought she was still in the process of understanding Chinese culture and Chinese way of operation (Sharon, 013). I had to explain to her everything, such as how I thought of it and why, what were the previous practices, what would be the next step and why, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of doing this way….very detail (Sharon, 014).

I couldn’t quite understand her point. For instance, she only visited my district once since she had been on board. I did not know it was because she was satisfied with my job or because she did not care at all. I think it was subject to different interpretations (Sharon, 019).

Gong reported to his company’s China CEO before his last transition. He left for a similar reason because he felt strong dissatisfaction with the management change after headquarters appointed a new CEO to replace his previous supervisor.

Working with the new CEO was a big problem. He did not understand our business in China, and he was obstinate. It was really hard to communicate with him. We had many conflicts. I really hated to work with him (Gong, 014).

It seemed that poor communications with direct supervisors from a different culture would influence local managers’ job satisfaction in MNCs. The cultural differences and trust issues might have played an important role in the interactions.
As a major system factor that caused the subsequent career transition across the organizational boundary among the managers, disjuncture with direct supervisors was observed among all three types of ownership systems. Managers had frequent daily interactions and communications with their direct supervisors in the workplace. The supervisor’s trust and support were necessary for good performance. Thus, a disjuncture with the direct supervisor may directly affect managers’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The disjuncture was often combined with psychological contract issues. For example, when managers observed unfair treatment of their peers, their trust and relationship with the supervisor would be tarnished. The combined effect would accelerate the career transition process as demonstrated by Ling’s case.

A few managers emphasized the influence of the relationship with their direct supervisors in their career transitions in the following excerpts.

I did want to help the company to develop in China for a longer time. I had been there for 12 years overall. But I did not want to help him anymore (Gong, 089)!

I might not have left if my boss had a little better sense in marketing, because we might have grabbed more opportunities while the business group restructured, say, attract external resources (Sheng, 099).

On the other hand, good relationships with direct supervisors may retain the managers or at least postpone their transition decision. While few managers mentioned about the loyalty to the organization during their decision making process, many mentioned loyalty to their direct supervisors. For example, Xi gave up his transition plan the first time after being persuaded from leaving by his supervisor, even though he had
already received another offer. He commented on his relationships with his supervisor:

He (his supervisor) hired me. My current career was started with him. I felt no regrets supporting him. It was impossible for me to support anybody else the way I did for him (Xi, 100).

For the same reason, Xi resigned from the company a year later because his supervisor left the company. The company tried to retain him again with a promotion. He shared his thoughts at the time:

There would be too much pressure if I stayed, because my previous colleagues might think I betrayed my former boss. He once encouraged me to leave at a private party (Xi, 133).

Being loyal to her direct supervisor led Helen to leave a reputable MNC and followed her boss to another company after her boss resigned. She articulated her rationale:

The interaction between my boss and I was great. From many years of experience in MNCs, I realized that working for a big brand was not as important as working for a great boss, because the daily interaction with your boss and the mutual trust were most important to keep you happy on the job (Helen, 016).

The data also showed that the loyalty to the direct manager, especially those who had been in a coaching or mentoring relationships with the managers had a strong influence on the decisions of leaving. A number of other managers such as Cindy, Rong, and Jesse, expressed similar feelings of guilt when they made a decision to leave.

Job Characteristics

Job characteristics were found greatly affected managers’ job satisfaction. The managers mentioned their dissatisfaction with their jobs and
the scope of work frequently. A typical scenario for managers to look for a change was when they do not feel challenged, or when a department or function under supervision was well established so daily work became a repetitive routine.

Job characteristics related dissatisfaction was mostly found in larger organizations such as SOEs or MNCs where managers had limited flexibility in the system. A typical environment was that the organization was hierarchical so that managers could hardly find stimulating challenges on the jobs. Zheng was a good example of this.

_I worked in this 2,000 square-meter computing center for 3 years. Once procedures and policies were established in the first year, all that left was routines without any change. It was just following the procedure, repetitive and boring. Everyone got bored. I began to look for new opportunities_ (Zheng, 006).

Jesse mentioned his dissatisfaction with the job content in a giant MNC company he once worked for:

_I often had to entertain clients, eating and drinking as part of my job, something like BD related client relations. Personally, that was not what I wanted to do_ (Jesse, 005)... _My work style is a combination of Koala-type and Owl-type. I’m task oriented, not relational, and focus on logic. I’m risk averse, and not good at working in noisy environment [refer to the Chinese way of drinking and eating]._ (Jesse, 007).

Similarly, as a HR director for a business unit, Sharon complained about her job when the big MNC she worked for was outsourcing its HR functions:

_Under the centralized structure, I could not control anything as a BU HR_ (Sharon, 074). _Everything was outsourced.. I felt my job had no value_ (Sharon, 075). _But controlling and coordinating with the outsourced company had always been problematic. So I had to put out fires everywhere and take on miscellaneous administrative tasks_ (Sharon, 076).
Job characteristics induced dissatisfaction could be reinforced after a challenging project, or a short term assignment within the same organization. Sharon recalled her experience with a large merger a year prior to her career transition.

*It was a big project. We acquired a local company with branches all over the country. So as a HR person, I had to travel a lot, visiting each plant, dismissing and recruiting employees, drafting and signing new contracts, and working with colleagues in finance, logistics and legal departments as a team, to takeover this new company* (Sharon, 031).

*Extremely busy and exciting* (Sharon, 032).

However, after this positive experience with the big project, Sharon found her attitude changed toward her routine HR work.

*When I went back to my previous role after the project ended, I realized my passion was not on daily HR routines, I had great potential to do more...* (Sharon, 033).

Lindsey shared a similar situation. Serving as a senior manager in corporate strategic planning, she had been with a giant MNC for 9 years with six years in business development (BD).

*The daily work was writing recommendations to the headquarters. It was not as challenging as a Business Development (BD) role you know. I could easily finish up the work with a third of my energy* (Lindsey, 022).

Some forward-looking managers took the job characteristics issue further and generated career transition plans which will be presented subsequently.

**Industry Constraints**

Under the overall climate of dramatic socio-economic changes, China has been experiencing rapid industry reshuffling. Traditional industries give ways to advanced and new industries with increased competition. Given the transitioning nature, some industries, or segments of an industry, were perceived unhealthy with limited career development opportunities by the career-minded managers. Such
perceptions have also prompted managers to make a career transition. A number of interviewees described and analyzed industry trends and the influence of the industry environment to their career advancement.

Jun’s most recent career transition was reflective of ongoing industry turmoil in data communication industry. A three-way merger and acquisition deal provided the background of his career transition. Here is a brief version of Jun’s lengthy story.

Initially, as a product manager, Jun had worked with a rapid growing local data communications company for 5 years.

*That company’s growth was so amazing, that the revenue grew from nothing in 2001 to 1.2 billion RMB in 2005. It was on the list of Asian Top 50 companies* (Jun, 120).

Jun had planned to move to an MNC company B together with his team in 2005 because it was in the process of acquiring two product lines from his previous employer, company A. At the time Jun and his team already moved into company B as part of due diligence process. However, company C, a giant local IT company entered competition that changed Jun’s career transition in six months. According to Jun, companies C did a separate deal with company B through a profitable large business transaction. Company C thus demanded to acquire the two product lines from company A as a bargaining chip with B for that deal. Forced by the pressure from C, B agreed to give up the scheduled acquisition of A. Under this agreement, 40% of workforce in company A would be merged into company C, including Jun and his team. Jun had to make a career decision of either joining company C or being on his own.
When asked why not joining company C, Jun explained:

*As a competitor, I knew company C too well and I disagreed with their aggressive culture. They had approached me a number of times in the past but I declined* (Jun, 021).

Jun shared his analysis of the future of the industry that he previously worked in.

*You could see the data communication industry would definitely be an oligopolistic market in two or three years. This implies that small companies like ours would not be able to survive. Big players would dominate the whole market, where smaller ones would have very limited market shares* (Jun, 027).

Another example was Hang, who had worked in entertainment industry before his last career transition. The industry had been destructed by severe copyright pirate activities in the Chinese market at the time.

*Even the four largest international music production companies could not make a profit in China. The illegal pirates were so aggressive, coupled with severe competition meant most players could only breakeven at best, and were waiting for a bright future* (Hang, 015).

Similarly, Harry was in the software industry and was aware of the market and the industry trends before his most recent career transition:

*From 2002 to 2004, the market segment of government enterprise software was not mature. Any deal with the government was not confidential. Your next government buyer, say, Jiangsu Province, could easily use previous deal with Shandong Province, to cut your price. As you know, it was government behavior. They would not consider your cost. It meant that you had to sell your software with ever-falling profit* (Harry, 103).

As a result of rapid changes in the Chinese economy, government policies often play a significant role in shaping emerging industries as perceived by the managers. Tong shared a related industrial experience:

*Starting on the Consumer Right’s Day in 2008, the government launched a year-long attack on spam texts. While the culprit company, accused of spamming 200 million users was quickly caught and forced out of the business, the repercussion of this campaign also quickly forced out 70-80 percent of companies in the industry* (Tong, 082).
It was not difficult to see that managers developing their careers in this uncertain industrial environment needed to plan their careers proactively. A number of other managers also described similar situations that affected their career transition intention.

Apparently, any of above disjuncture with organizational systems, direct supervisors, job characteristics, or industry may reduce job satisfaction and trigger their intention for career transition. All of these potential causes may further complicated by the following personal factors.

**Personal Aspirations Shaping Career Transitions**

While facing similar fast-evolving environment or triggering events, the managers interviewed have displayed different career transition decision patterns. While this is influenced by various prior career experiences, different career stages, levels of self-reflection, learning process, and self-motivations, personal aspiration was found to be a key indicator for career decisions. Personal aspirations to career transitions are those attributes related to personal values, work related interests and personalities that are either innate or developed during the interaction with external environment (Super, 1980). Without internal motivation or reflection, the social environment may not be able to influence career decision making process (Krumboltz, 1996). Therefore, the interactions between personal aspirations and environmental factors may shape different transition patterns among managers.

Three types of personal aspirations as presented in the following were found to be important in determining the managers’ career transition patterns. They are career
exploration, career repositioning, and career advancement. In most cases, they were intertwined in the career transition decision process. Table 5 reported a summary of the major concepts in this category.

**Table 5**

*Personal Aspiration*

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Career Exploration

Career exploration is to explore possible career paths and opportunities without a determined direction or trend, including desires and behaviors in seeking for new occupation or professions, searching for different types of ownership, and looking for opportunities in different industries. The ultimate goal of career exploration is to explore “what else I can do.”

Yong apparently got bored with his previous job and expressed his desire for a challenging career before the career transition.

*It was too stable, truly stable! When I looked back on that job, it was all the same, very boring. You go to office every day, and come back home at the same time, I really wanted to make some changes* (Yong, 020).

Yong had a very clear and certain internal career path in the previous SOE, yet he preferred to exploring an uncertain but more rewarding career outside the system.

*I had a good relationship with my boss. He told me that he planned to promote me to the next level in two years. After that, I knew I had only one more step up before my retirement. I could predict what my life would be like till the day of retirement there* (Yong, 012).

Sheng was also bored with the existing system. He wanted to go out of the traditional wholesale industry and explore a new industry.

*I had been in the group company for nine years. Maybe because I stayed for too long, I felt that I was sluggish and lacked creativity. I wanted to make a change, to move to a different industry or field* (Sheng, 018).

Gong expressed his intention of exploring a different type of ownership system when he was considering transition possibilities:

*I had been with this MNC for too long. It was a family business. I’d been wondering how a family business could grow to a $10 billion business. It was amazing!* (Gong, 046)
Zheng was a manager with good technical background. She was bored of the routine operations of the previous job and attracted by an opportunity to explore new technology.

*There was an opportunity in planning a nationwide fiber-optic network. Large databases would be operated on this huge network, which was quite a new technology in the data management business. I felt excited about this opportunity (Zheng, 007).*

With the desire in seeking for new opportunities, a number of other managers were found not quite clear about what they were looking for, but simply wanted to have a change. They shared similar thoughts about exploring the uncertainty in a different environment.

*I just wanted to explore the outside world. I felt it was really a pity if you stayed in one organization from 18 years old until your retirement. But I did not really know what I wanted (Rong, 047)!*

*If you stayed with a single employer for too long, they might have concern about your adaptability, as I learned from my headhunter friends (Sharon, 009).*

While dissatisfied with the existing jobs and desired for a change, they had initial doubts about their adaptability and capability prior to the transition as articulated by the two managers below:

*In fact, I was not sure about the external job market. I was quite comfortable with the previous company. But I had not changed my job for 12 years… (Gong, 069).*

*Whenever I saw a good opportunity in the newspaper I was keen on it, I would always ask myself, “Can I do it? Do I have sufficient skills for that? Can I take the work pressure?” I was always hesitant you know. I wanted to make a move, but doubted my capability at the same time (Rong, 040).*
Career Repositioning

Quite a few managers expressed a strong desire to reposition their careers in their last transitions. They wanted to change their career paths and career goals based on the adjusted value orientation or evolving career interests. The desire for the repositioning appeared to be triggered by their career experiences, especially the dissonance with their role in the former organizations. They gradually found their value orientation and their true career interest from previous experience. For instance, Cindy experienced a role conflict between what she wanted and what she was supposed to do on her former HR position.

As an HR person, my role was defined not to be a spokesperson for the worker, but play a mediating role between shareholders, management, and the workers. But my feeling was that the scale in my heart was unbalanced. I wanted to take care of people as individuals, regardless whether they are average employees or those in the management, for them to lead a better work life, be happier and more effective (Cindy, 033).

Gradually, Cindy found her value orientation and her true career interest from her HR position.

I later realized that my HR position wouldn’t make me happy. I wanted to be able to help people, change their lives, develop their careers, and influence them in my way (Cindy, 062). And I wanted to make decision. I needed to take more responsibilities and not be afraid of taking risk. I wanted to lead things in a direction where I could make a difference (Cindy, 063).

Power found what he really wanted after experiencing the mismatch between what his former employer offered and what he wanted.

I think people’s careers have something to do with their personal characteristics. I am not a person like to abide by the rules made by others. I wanted to make changes. Productivity and personal achievement have been the core of my value. So I didn’t think the SOE was for me (Power, 084).
Yu clarified that the thought of renewing his career life was not a sudden realization, but became stronger over time.

...It was not like that I woke up one morning and realized I was 40 and I needed to do something different. Deeply inside, my thought was that I had been gaining experiences. By now, I should be ready for something else (Yu, 055).

Sharon and Harry also described their desires for repositioning themselves when they realized that the jobs they were doing were no longer valued.

I thought it was a trend for HR functions. Many tasks were centralized from business units to outsourcing (Sharon, 020). I didn’t believe what I was doing was good for my future (Sharon, 021).

After a few years in this market, I realized that it was not a healthy one (Harry, 187). I felt it was not worthy for me getting involved in it, I wanted to get out of this market soon (Harry, 188).

Consequently, the desire of repositioning themselves drove the managers to discover their real interests and value, and finally evolved into a clearer career goals and objectives, as Sharon elaborated below:

I liked recruiting the most (Sharon, 140). I liked to communicate with people (Sharon, 141). I could always learn something from others. It was helpful not only to my career, but also good to teach my son. I felt it was a good direction (Sharon, 142). ..And it was totally different from my previous jobs as an internal HR person (Sharon, 145). I can apply all my experience, and can expand my networks (Sharon, 146).

Career Advancement

A majority of the managers expressed a strong desire for career advancement. Typically, these managers felt their career advancement or development had been stalled in their pre-transition organizations. For example, Mary explained her rationale for a career transition she made six years ago.
After a while, I realized that I reached a bottleneck. I had been a
government relations manager for years, my team members had come and gone until I was the only one still around (Mary, 002). This company [post-transition company] provided such a great opportunity. They were looking for someone to build up the GR function from ground up, which was exactly what I was looking for (Mary, 004).

Tong described his dissatisfaction with a slow career movement in his previous company, a large, stable organization.

*I knew it was a development issue. As an HR person, your advancement is subject to the business development and market development of the organization you are in. My growth there fell far short of my expectation.. I mean, my career advancement was just too slow (Tong, 006).

Yong encountered an obstacle in his career advancement in the pre-transition company:

*One reason (why I left) was, I really wanted to go to a newly established subsidiary company to take a position with more responsibilities (Yong, 038). I felt there was nothing to learn on my existing position (Yong, 039). But my supervisor did not want me to leave because he did not want a rookie to replace me. So he refused to support the move (Yong, 040).

Yong further explained why he chose his current employer:

*I can see many development opportunities in my current company. It is the leading company in the industry and it is growing quickly. I believe there will be a handful of career opportunities each year. For example, I’ll have the opportunity to be a finance manager in a second layer subsidiary company, or to be a director in a third layer subsidiary for my next career move in two years (Yong, 056).

Having opportunities to pursue accelerated careers, managers perceived urgency in following the existing career paths. Power analyzed his situation in his pre-transition company:

*Because in SOEs, I was considered young at the time. To be promoted to division leader was doable through my own efforts. But to be promoted to a higher rank, I had to be waiting in line (Power, 039). Also, it would not depend on your ability, but on something else (Power, 041).
Helen wanted to advance her career by taking a position with a greater management scope.

I knew I could lead a team of more senior and experienced people, but I could not get this opportunity in that company. Nowadays, I developed a team with majority of the members older than me. This was what I wanted. I believe that as a manager you should think more about how to deal with people, motivate people, instead of focusing on tasks. It is from the strategic level you see (Helen, 047).

Managers pursuing career advancement were not only looking for attractive job titles and expanded management scopes, but were also paying attention to how their careers would advance their knowledge and expertise.

Why did I choose this company? Because I thought I had not learned the core skills in marketing research. This company was number one in the industry. I knew I could learn what I wanted here (Susan, 097).

Compared to those in the first sub-category of career exploration, managers with a desire for career advancement showed higher degree of transition readiness.

I knew it was not the last rose in the summer. My future was not there, I would leave for things meaningful to myself sooner or later. It was just a period of hibernating (Mary, 158).

….I had longed to be an entrepreneur from my college days. I could not describe my feeling toward it, but it was there in my heart, for quite a long time. I had to make it happen (Power, 075).

I was always looking for entering an industry, in which I could find my long term career development in technology. I was trying to find a leading company in an emerging industry. The current company is the right platform for me to contribute my knowledge and competencies (Harry, 247).

It seemed that their focus was on when and where to make a career transition instead of whether or not to have one. Comments by Wen and Helen represented this point well.
Worked as an HR person for many years, I had thought about leaving for doing training and consulting. I had this idea for a while, just waiting for a right time (Wen, 003).

My profession (finance) is not limited by industry. So I wanted to enrich my experience in more industries. I was just thinking about which industry I needed to enter in order to learn more and advance my career to the next level (Helen, 053).

The perceived readiness instigated managers to take opportunities to move forward and materialize their career advancement plan by making a career transition across organizations. For instance, Power took advantage of a severance plan when his previous company was restructuring and offered an option for those who wished to leave.

*It was just a good opportunity, and I could get the amount of money needed from the severance package* (Power, 031).

In short, it appeared that the interactions between dissonance with the environment and personal career aspirations created an impetus for managers’ career transitions. With variant degrees of self-knowledge and perceived dissonance with the environment, personal aspirations helped determine different patterns of career transitions. The following section will unfold career transition process and patterns the managers experienced.

**Career Transition Process**

Different career aspirations and the interactions between environmental factors and personal traits, caused variations in the career transition process in terms of timing, duration of planning, radical level, and subsequent role adjustment. Accordingly, a process made up of five major stages of career transition emerged from the data, including decision to quit, career planning, considering external
opportunities, final career choice, and assimilation into the new role. Table 6 summarizes the five stages and related properties with frequency.

Table 6

*Career Transition Process*

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Decision to Quit

During voluntary transitions, the first inevitable decision for managers to make is whether to quit from their previous organizations. Four dimensions associated with this sub-category emerge. They are career fatigue and reduced job satisfaction, urgency, level of difficulty, and decision timing.

A common phenomenon is that career-changing managers have demonstrated symptoms of career fatigue to various degrees before making the move. Career fatigue refers to an unshakable weariness from the routine, tasks, activities and challenges of an established profession (Rychel & Dewyer, 2005). No matter what the triggering factors were, the managers appeared to have little interest in the majority of the tasks in their existing positions and found themselves with reduced productivity.

For example, Sheng stated:

*I stayed with this company for too long.. I lost my creativity, and my thoughts were dry. I always felt tired on the job* (Sheng, 020).

Yu expressed the same point differently:

*I had been working for different companies for almost 20 years. I felt I didn’t want to work for anyone at all. Life is short; I wanted to do something for myself* (Yu, 038).

This attitude was also accompanied by behaviors such as poor performance, little interest in work, and unwillingness to take more responsibilities. Xi recalled:

*I was just in that mood. Going to work and surfing on the internet, chatting with colleagues, smoking and drinking tea. Gossiping about who had left and who got promoted* (Xi, 179).

Reduced job satisfaction seemed to be another related symptom among the managers before they quit. It was evident in the interview data.
The job had lost its meaning to me. Every morning when I drove to my office, I was always telling myself the same words “you are just wasting your life” (Yu, 054).

It was really a difficult period for me. I frequently fought with my boss and I felt unhappy on that job (Susan, 060).

Those who had disjuncture with their direct supervisors were eager to leave because they felt uncomfortable and could not stand the awkward situation any longer with strong dissatisfactions with their jobs. For example, Mary recalled her feeling of hurt after the conflict with her direct supervisor, the managing director of greater China region.

After that event, I felt like there was a nail in my heart! It was already there, I could not remove it. Everyone could see that from the way he treated me. I couldn’t take that any more (Mary, 055).

Reduced job satisfaction and career fatigue may influence not only the managers’ psychological status, but also their health conditions. Rong and Yu shared their experience in this aspect.

I thought this kind of organization was simply not for me. I was unhappy and always sick. But after I quit the job, all the illness disappeared. I thought people’s health had something to do with their mood (Rong, 027).

I got all kinds of health problems in that year. My medical bill was always the highest in the entire company. All my accumulated health problems seemed to surface one after another, rash all over followed by stomach problems and a never-ending cold (Yu, 042).

Managers also demonstrated various degrees of urgency for their quit decision. With uneasy relationships with their supervisors and a need to solve the perceived problems, some mangers took quit as a solution. Xi and Mary commented:

Under the situation, it (quit job) was the only decision made sense (Xi, 177).
It didn’t take me long to ponder whether to leave. If you are not happy with your boss, you will leave soon (Mary, 053).

Under this situation, managers often decided to quit hastily, taking no more than a couple of months from the time the thought first appeared to the time of a resignation. For example, it took Ling two months to make the decision and Mary in three months. Even though it was a voluntary career transition, some managers felt that they had no choice but leave, such as Gong.

I thought I could not withdraw then, just like “an arrow on a drawn bow”. If the new CEO came six months earlier or if I hadn’t contacted the headhunter, I wouldn’t have left. But everything moved toward it (Gong, 048).

Not all managers followed the same decision pattern. Others made the quit decision with little urgency even under an uncomfortable situation. Dissatisfied with the status quo, they were not in a hurry until they found the right opportunities. Yong was clear about this:

My plan was simple. I would only leave if there was a better opportunity elsewhere. (Yong, 011).

Similarly Jesse waited until an opportunity kept knocking on his door.

I wasn’t eager to leave in the beginning. But a friend had been talking to me about an opportunity for two years. He first offered me a position of HR manager, then HR Director, then VP of Operation. It was too attractive to ignore (Jesse, 015).

Quitting was not an easy decision to make for most interviewees. They reported that their decisions to quit were often met with forces pulling them back to the organization. With their established reputation and authority in the existing organizational environment, managers had to determine if they could afford to leave. A typical comment was offered by Tong:

Talking about it now is easier than making the decision then. I think it was a difficult decision for most people. There is a Chinese saying
“shede.”. It means if you cannot give up on something, you will never gain anything. I understood that I had to give up what I had already established before I could move forward and pursue... whatever I planned (Tong, 022)

The interviewees mentioned a number of forces that had affected their decision to leave. First, their previous employers have tried to convince them to stay.

Helen described her situation.

In order to keep me, my boss agreed to reduce my work load and offered me flexible working hours (Helen, 028).

Some organizations provided attractive alternative positions to retain the managers who intended to quit. For instance, Ling and Gong both had been persuaded by their bosses to postpone their decision to leave.

But the founder didn’t want me to leave. ... She said “how about I make you an HR Manager of another business unit. Or you can visit all our subsidiaries and take whichever company and whichever position you like (Ling, 111).

I felt good about the rotation. Our HR people seldom had the opportunity to do business. I enjoyed doing business for two years and finished three big projects (Gong, 019).

Gong actually delayed his career transition by two years due to a functional rotation from a VP of HR to a regional sales director, and Ling was still with the same company at the time of the interview.

A second factor that had influenced their decisions to leave appeared to be the attachment to an ongoing project. Career-minded managers tended to delay a quit decision because of a project that they deemed to be significant for their careers.

Besides, a sense of professionalism required them to finish projects at hand before leaving, or what an interviewee referred to as shan shi shan zhong, “seeing things
through from the beginning to the end” (Harry, 018), was important to their professional reputations.

"I couldn’t leave. The whole software design was mine. Even the major customers were all under my control. If I left, nobody would know how to follow up with the project (Harry, 021).

Furthermore, these projects helped develop their expertise and skills. Hence, managers mentioned that an ideal time to make a career transition was when a major project they worked on had been completed.

"I didn’t want to leave during that period. Why? I wanted to finish the project first. It was a redesign of compensation and benefits structure for the entire organization. I planned it for a long time and I could not leave without seeing it succeed (Cindy, 109).

Jun echoed the same point about the strategies he developed for the company.

"I wanted to see the final outcome. I wanted to know how the overall process turned out…I wanted to know the end result of my work, just like I would want to know the scores in a shooting practice (Jun, 139).

Opportunity cost was another consideration pulling managers back.

"You know I had to give up lots of benefits if I leave because the company was in a process of negotiating a foreign joint venture (Ling, 063).

Family issues were also influencing the decision to quit. Jesse recalled his wife’s support during his decision making:

"My wife supported my decision to quit. She always said that my work was not challenging and was repetitive without “technical content.” Plus her career was advancing quickly at the time. She even said that she was making enough money to support the family even if I could not find my next job. So I decide to leave (Jesse, 077).

Lastly, the bond with the former employer was a factor considered during the decision making process. Experiencing the growth of the company and recruited most of the employees, Ling felt difficult to make the decision to leave.

"...the colleagues and the relationships, lots of things were connected. I thought about it for quite some time (Ling, 065).
The timing of managers’ decisions to quit displayed different patterns. Some indicated that they made a quit decision before they could materialize any external opportunities as in Ling’s case.

*I decided to leave first and then he contacted me* (Ling, 028).

But Zheng was more conservative to make the decision. She combined the quit decision with the decision to pursue new career opportunities.

*Of course I would not go without confirming my next job. I need a right opportunity to leave this company* (Zheng, 095).

Helen described how she handled the two related decisions:

*I spent two months to mull over (the transition decision)... In January I signed the offer letter and mailed it. Then I sent a formal resignation letter and declined an attractive counteroffer for internal transfer. That was my final decision* (Helen, 027).

Although a number of managers mentioned that they planned to quit before finding the next job, only one actually quit prior to an external offer. In other words, for most managers, quitting depended on whether a realistic new opportunity was at hand. For example, Sheng spent over a year exploring new job opportunities. Once a job offer finalized, he quickly *quit and joined this company in a couple of weeks after an unofficial meeting with the boss* (Sheng, 027).

**Career Planning**

Five properties were identified to capture the characteristics of interviewees’ career planning. They demonstrated deliberations in general career directions and long term planning of their careers. They not only generated career alternatives, but also evaluated possible opportunities, and put their family and their particular life stage into account. Significant variance in career planning was found among interviewees.
Because of the perceived urgency in making a decision, some had neither planned for their subsequent careers before the quit decisions, nor had they deliberated the consequences of their actions. Xi recalled:

*I had no plan for the future at that time. I just knew I might find another company to work for, but I had not prepared for that* (Xi, 148).

At age of forty three, Sheng only had broad career ideas but were not clear about what he wanted specifically. He felt that staying at an SOE was like “*cooking a frog starting with warm water*” (Sheng, 080). He just wanted to jump out of the system:

*My career plan was to find a job out of the SOE system. I was tired of working there. I hated the system’s inertia. But I didn’t know exactly where I wanted to go* (Sheng, 061).

Rong echoed the same idea, but was concerned about the uncertainty of a career transition.

*I just wanted to take a look at outside. Actually there might be much uncertainty. I was not very clear what I really wanted.* (Rong, 136)

Not every manager was prepared sufficiently for the career transitions, especially those who made the move to a different industry or different type of enterprise. Sheng reflected on his transition experience and realized that his decision to move to a new industry was premature.

*I knew I could face challenges when I moved to a new field, but I had not expected that many. It was more than what I had expected. I realized I lacked both the theoretical foundation and hands-on experience in the new industry*” (Sheng, 039).

Before making the transition, a few managers evaluated internal opportunities as alternatives. For example, Tong was clear about his career options at his former company:
In the previous company, there were three roles to play as an HR person, each representing a career stage. First, you begin with at headquarters in a role like a physician specialist, responsible for one function, such as recruiting or training. If you were promoted for a generalist in a business unit, your responsibilities would cover all HR functions. Very few of us, would then be promoted to a specialist role back to the headquarters. If you do not want to repeat yourself, you have few options, either become a general manager of HR or rotate to business unit. What else can I do (Tong, 079)?

Based on his analysis of available internal options, Tong began to look externally:

I was open to other positions, such as performance evaluation, organizational development, or learning and development. I did have interest in these areas, and would pursue them if opportunities arise (Tong, 081).

Cindy considered different scenarios when contemplating her plan.

I had been thinking of one question--what would you do when you have a conflict with the system or you don’t like the rules of the game? There would be four options. First, accept the rules and change yourself. Second, replace the rules if you have the power. Third, leave and find another game you like. Last, create a new game and you’d be the rule-maker, requiring those who want to join to follow your rules. I am the kind of person inclined to pursue the third or the fourth option (Cindy, 137).

Based on the above rationale, she further considered her career options:

First, be a professional manager again in a different company. Second, go to a consulting firm as a senior consultant, I knew I could do it. I did something similar before. Third, go to a different company and focus on one HR function, such as compensation and benefits. Fourth, be a freelancer trainer and I had done a lot of training for MBA students before. Fifth, be an entrepreneur and my own boss. But I already knew I didn’t want to be a professional manager anymore. Neither did I want to be a trainer nor consultant, because I felt my influence would be limited. I wanted to do things myself! That’s how you feel you have accomplished something. I felt it was something from my genes (Cindy, 104).

Wen even had a timetable for his transition;

I always believed that three to five years of tenure with a company is a right time frame to make a move. I have learned what I needed to learn and have tried what I wanted to try. It is an appropriate time for me to make a change (Wen, 010)
A few managers’ career planning was not limited to the immediate career transition but for long-term development. Susan had experienced three career transitions and shared her thoughts on how to advance career.

*I didn’t set out to join the No. 1 company in the industry at the time* (she is currently with the No. 1 consulting firm in the industry), *but I had a clear idea that I had to get out of the SOE and enter the consulting field, and then move to a leading company in the industry, or a company with the most advanced technology* (Susan, 122).

Tong further elaborated his career plan that had developed from her years of HR experience.

*If you want to advance in the HR field, you need a long time to acquire skills and experience. If you always stay in one company as I did, the experience would be quite limited, because you are only familiar with one organization’s culture, system and processes. It is far from enough. I needed to explore different types of organizations, especially those at different stages of development* (Tong, 015).

In traditional Chinese culture, men are expected to establish careers by their thirties to support their families. Therefore, “*san shi er li*” (establishing oneself by thirty) is not only a family expectation, but also a social pressure Chinese men face. This cultural tendency was evident in the data among the male managers. Quite a few mentioned their concerns about the age issue for career transitions, including Sheng, Power, Tong, Wen, Jesse, Harry and Hang. Most of their age related concerns stemmed from a sense of urgency to establish and advance their careers. For example, Harry observed:

*In China, the age of 35 is a turning point for people in technology. I remember that I once saw a recruitment advertisement that specifically required the applicants to be under 35. I did feel a pressure in terms of age* (Harry, 156).
Wen also thought his transition was related to his age.

Maybe because of the age, you already have some work experiences, you know, you did want to make some decision on some changes (Wen, 027)

Power related his age to his longtime dream:

Another reason was my age. I was already thirty. If I stayed at the SOE, I might not be able to leave any more. But it was against my dream (Power, 074)

Tong further divided his professional age into two stages:

This was part of my plan. I believe that the age of thirty-five should be a turning point for me. Before then, I was in learning and accumulating experience. After that critical age, I have to put what I have accumulated and translate my experience to something of value (Tong, 065).

Yet, the age pressure was somewhat different for females. Rong expressed her age concern from a competitive perspective.

If this opportunity came to me two years later, I might not have considered it. I would be 35 after all. Everybody knows it is harder to start over when you get older, especially for women (Rong, 036).

Ling echoed:

I was about 30 years old at the time. I thought I wouldn’t have the gut to quit the SOE if I did not do it then (Ling, 014).

Two other female managers shared stereotypical perceptions toward females’ career development even though they did not express any concern for their own career transitions.

There were not many people who were as brave as I was. In fact most women would look for a stable life and career at my age (Susan, 137).

My husband didn’t quite understand what I wanted and told me, “you are a woman and working there without any pressure, it is a good place for you until your retirement” (Lindsey, 029).

Interestingly, most Chinese managers interviewed did not express family concerns on the planning of the transitions. In fact many reported their spouses’
support, such as Jesse, Yu, Ling, and Rong. Some combined their career planning with their family plans. For example, Helen was conscious about the needs of her family when she was planning for her career:

I knew I would leave sooner or later. I had to move to Haidian (a good school district in Beijing) before my daughter turned three. So it was decided long before I quit the job (Helen, 034).

**External Opportunities**

External career opportunities played an important role in interviewees’ decision making processes and influenced decisions in different pattern. The following three properties were found describing major variances in interviewees’ behavior in their decision making.

Interviewees reported attitudes and behaviors either active or passive in searching external opportunities. Some managers made an effort in looking for external opportunities when they decided to leave their former employers. Sharon mentioned her experience in actively searching for new opportunities with the help of headhunters.

I disclosed my intention of making a move to some friends in the headhunting business (Sharon, 029) ... There was little chance with FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) industry in Beijing because their headquarters were moving from Beijing to Shanghai. But I wanted to stay in Beijing where my family lived. So I began to contact some big companies in other industries through headhunters (Sharon, 032).

Rong described how she read newspapers to identify career opportunities while trying to hide her intention to leave when she was working for the SOE.

Since I wanted to leave, I was looking for opportunities. When other people in the office skimmed newspapers, so did I. But I only paid attention to the job ads, and others hardly notice it (Rong, 048).
Not all managers were actively searching for their next jobs. Some were simply approached by external opportunities. For example, Ling was contacted by the founder of her new employer after collaborating with her on a project.

*It was around January 2005, we collaborated on a big project, and we had meetings together. I shared some of my ideas at the meetings and maybe she thought I was good. She then began to recruit me for her company* (Ling, 038).

Jesse also shared his experience of how he was attracted and pulled out by the external opportunities.

*I was not eager to leave in the beginning. But a friend had been talking about this opportunity to me for two years. He offered me a position of an HR manager, then HR director, then VP of operation. It was just too attractive to decline* (Jesse, 015).

It has long been recognized that Guanxi is the lifeblood of Chinese business community (Ramasamy, Goh, & Yeung, 2006). This appeared to be true regarding the managers’ career transitions. “Guanxi” relationship was found as one of the primary job search and referral approaches among the managers interviewed. Guanxi relationship, in interviewees’ words, referred to a personal network of friends, colleagues and other acquaintances, including *shuren* (old friends), *faxiao* (childhood friends), classmates of all kinds, and even friends’ friends. In the interviews, twelve managers mentioned that their transitions were accomplished through their guanxi relationships either directly or indirectly.

Interviewees often referred to official or unofficial relationships for new career opportunities. Sheng described how *guanxi* helped his career transition:

*It happened that one of my friends had good guanxi with my current boss. The boss had just begun to plan for restructuring the company and needed someone to help him. It was just a possibility and my friend knew I wanted to make a move* (Sheng, 026).
According to Sheng, he was not familiar with the company or the industry, but he was able to make this important decision within days of getting in touch with his new boss who was a friend of a friend. Clearly it all depended on guanxi-based trust.

Zheng’s experience was quite similar:

There was a time when I attend international telecommunication expo and ran into this shuren, who happened to be from my previous company (Zheng, 108). I knew he was a good guy, so I was talked into this company (Zheng, 111).

She made a decision to quit and joined this new company just because her new boss was a previous colleague. She further explained the reason on how this guanxi influenced her decision:

He had a big influence on my decision because he was powerful in that company and had good guanxi with the boss. The boss supported everything he was in charge of (Zheng, 021).

Guanxi certainly facilitated mutual trust between the two parties. Sheng was explicit about his rationale on taking advantage of guanxi relationships.

When you are looking for a new job, it is better to be introduced by somebody (Sheng, 042). If I applied for two positions in two different companies, even if I got offers from both, I would definitely join the one I was referred to because it meant I had some “guanxi” there (Sheng, 043). I would feel safer there (Sheng, 044). That was why I joined this company. Even though I did not quite understand their business, but I believed it was not a bad company (Sheng, 045).

He further explained:

This way, even if you were not able to quickly assimilate, at least you were introduced by guanxi, they might have a first impression about your association, your personality or your character and it would be easier for you to be understood. Otherwise I believe it would be more difficult to be accepted (Sheng, 046).

Ling echoed from her experience of being familiar with and recruited by the founder of the new employer, indicating the importance of guanxi during her career transition.
After all, the founder talked me into this. So I was different (Ling, 153). Looking at other senior managers, they all worked their way up internally. None was hired from outside, I was the only one successfully launched from outside of the company (Ling, 154).

Building up guanxi, or having a connection with insiders was important to many. Hang articulated the process he used to approach an opportunity by getting to know an insider. That turned into a career opportunity for him to join the company later.

It was almost all done through my friends. I told my friends and one introduced me to her friend in that company (Hang, 021)...Then my friend arranged a dinner party with its HR vice president. It was purely a social event. We didn’t even talk about the job directly. After that, we email each other like friends. When we felt comfortable with each other, I decided to join them (Hang, 028).

The strategy of building guanxi was also applied by organizations looking for management talents. Ling recalled being recruited by the founder of her new employer:

Because we did not know each other well in the beginning, so she had been communicating with me through a good friend of mine. Later on, she contacted me directly by phone and text messaging. We also had lunches together regularly for about a year. The founder tried twice to convince me join them. There was never a formal interview (Ling, 039).

Although external opportunities were important in career transitions for many, managers had different opinions on their importance to their decision making. For instance, Sharon considered internal motivation the most important factor to influence her career transition:

I feel it is seldom the case that an external pulling force can get someone out of an existing career. I don’t think that force can be strong enough to do that (Sharon, 018).

External opportunity seemed to have played a more important role in Jesse’s case:
I was not eager to leave in the beginning. But a friend had been talking about this opportunity to me for two years. He offered me a position of an HR manager, then HR director, then VP of operation. It was just too attractive to decline (Jesse, 015).

Feeling interested, Jesse began to explore the opportunity.

Later on I found this boss was open-minded and really wanted to attract outside management talent. The management there was really weak and they did need someone good. So I decided to take a look (Jesse, 030).

Jesse further elaborated on a critical event that spurred him to quit.

I took a weekend to help them coordinate an internal meeting. I did it the way we were trained and applied at MNCs to facilitate the meeting. They were so excited. The boss told me he had never had a meeting like this, so comfortable, and everyone was motivated to participate...I also felt good. And I felt I can make use of what I learned from MNC there. So I felt it was the time to join them (Jesse, 031).

In the beginning, Jesse did not have a strong intention to leave but was progressively talked into the external opportunity. However, he also admitted:

I thought the attractiveness of the external opportunity was important, but if you were satisfied with your current job, say you have a sense of great achievement from what you are doing is the critical thing (Jesse, 079).

Power noted that an external opportunity at a right time did influence his decision to quit.

... a senior executive from a foreign company I knew became the CEO of its Chinese subsidiary, but he wanted to start his own business in China and invited me to join him (Power, 028)...It was just like you wanted to leave, and there was just an opportunity (Power, 029).

Career Choices

Career choice may be a second important consideration in the career transition process. Five dimensions have emerged to illustrate this concept, including availability of alternatives, tentativeness, evaluating career alternatives, career choice rationale, and influence from others.
Choosing a new career is a critical decision in career transitions. As presented earlier, some made this decision and the decision to quit at the same time, but others did not. For those who were desperate to leave, they tended to grab the first available opportunity to leave. Even though this kind of transition appeared to be voluntary, it seemed to be a decision of no choice from the interviewees’ perspective. Mary described her rationale of the career choice under this situation in detail:

*I got this offer in a hurry* (Mary, 085). *Later on I realized that it was a mistake to take this offer* (Mary, 086). *I was too eager to leave* (Mary, 087). *They offered me a much higher salary. The title also sounded good* (Mary, 088). *But I didn’t like the new boss from the moment I met him, and I was not that clear about the job responsibility and the organizational culture* (Mary, 089). *But I had no other choice at the time* (Mary, 090). *I did regret for a moment* (Mary, 091), *but I was more concerned about the fact that everyone would laugh at me if I stayed* (Mary, 092).

For others, such as the managers who wanted to explore new careers, their career choices were often tentative. Gong was such an example.

*I was not sure if the new company had a bright future. In fact I did not think too much at the time. To be honest with you, I just needed an opportunity to leave the system. This company would not be a platform for my long term development* (Gong, 025).

With these tentative career choices, it was apparent that managers were not clear about the external job market and career alternatives. Therefore, they were not able to make informed career decisions. Rong also fell into this category:

*Frankly, I did not know the market salary of an auditing manager like me. I just thought I was good and I wanted to explore and experience the outside world* (Rong, 035).

A number of managers were more deliberate in making the decision. They had evaluated career alternatives combined with industry trends and the environment in
their existing organizations before making a career decision. Tong described his analysis:

_The wireless telecommunication industry had experienced a tough year, 70% to 80% players in the market had disappeared. That means the surviving companies will have more opportunities. The service providers would move into different segmented markets_ (Tong, 082).

Sharon even conducted a thorough analysis based on available industry and organizational information.

_After interviewing with their boss, I went to my friends in the industry_ (Sharon, 035). _It turned out that the company had a good reputation_ (Sharon, 036). _I contacted two friends who used to work there for their opinions. They all said it was a decent company where employees were respected_ (Sharon, 037). _I also thought of going to a MNC instead. I did some research and found that most foreign headhunting businesses were small_ (Sharon, 038). _This company already had 300 employees and eight offices including Hong Kong and India_ (Sharon, 039). _I also noticed that most businesses of foreign companies were from their overseas branches_ (Sharon, 040). _I might develop more in a local company considering my local network and my experience_ (Sharon, 041).

Another consideration in relation to career choice was the size of the organization. After analyzing the developmental stage of Chinese organizations, Tong determined the direction of his job search.

_In fact, there were very few companies with the scale of my previous company in China. There were more small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). I thought I need to experience organizations of different sizes, especially with SMEs_ (Tong, 021).

Jun articulated a three-step process in this phase to determine his career choice.

_First I selected the industry. I noticed that internet security was an emerging market with plenty of opportunities_ (Jun 033)…_Then I look at the companies in this industry. The ideal ones would be those with internet security as its core business. I wanted to choose a company that was not only involved in the security business, but also a key player in the market. It mattered to me if the company’s strategic_
emphasis was in internet security and owned the technology it uses (Jun, 037)... The next thing to consider was the team. That was why I chose this company. In fact there were four or so major players in this market, and this company had a more democratic management team than the others (Jun, 047).

This deliberation and analysis was logically extended to the new career by the managers. For example, Jun had met with his soon-to-be supervisor and negotiated not only the compensation and benefits but also his future responsibilities.

During my interview with my soon-to-be boss, I told him I was familiar with POEs, most of which do not have a neat organizational structure and clearly defined responsibilities. Later on I found it was indeed the case. Therefore, the job title was not important to me. I suggested that I be placed on probation for three months without any job title. After that, I would take defined responsibilities with a corresponding job title. Then, I would influence the company and make my contributions (Jun, 073). During the decision making process, a few managers were influenced by others. Ling was recruited by the founder of her new employer. She described the interactions between them:

To be honest, the founder is the only person in my life that I cannot argue with… (Ling, 140).

After thinking about her exit from her previous position, she met with the founder twice and decided to join her company.

We talked the whole afternoon. Actually I didn’t say “yes” at the time. Then we had a second meeting, I decided to join them (Ling, 068). Why did I agree after the second meeting? I think it was because she did her homework well. She compared the two companies in terms of their future developments and visions. She knew my old boss and she was good at observing people (Ling, 083).

Susan was also influenced to join the new employer by one of its partners, who was also her MBA classmate at the time.

In the beginning I did not feel good about that company…(Susan, 013). But a few days after the interview, one of my classmates called me and wanted to meet. I then knew he was a partner in that company. I felt comfortable talking with him, because his experience was similar to
mine, coming from an SOE, I felt interested in joining them (Susan, 014).

Assimilation into the New Role

The final stage of the managers’ career transition process was to assimilate into the new role after moving to their new positions. Changed business role, management scope, and adjusted job emphasis as well as adjustment difficulties were found important to describe this career transition stage.

Transitioning into a new position in a new organizational and/or industrial environment, managers were facing challenges in dealing with changes in management scopes and responsibilities, as well as different role expectations from different systems, The interviewed managers shared their experiences on how they took time and effort to adjust and assimilate into their new roles and complete the transition process. For instance, Power changed his role from a buyer to a seller in telecommunications industry and experienced role differences as described below.

*My previous employer was a large SOE. It was the largest buyer in the industry and I was in a position to make big purchasing decisions (Power, 024). I usually refused to contact suppliers and declined all their gifts which I saw as bribes (Power, 097)...When I started my own business, I also sent gifts to business leads and hope they’d accept them happily. If that happened, I would feel grateful. But if someone insists to return it to me, I felt hurt. It was really a shame when your invitation was declined by your clients (Power, 099).*

Experiencing different feelings toward the same behavior during role changes, Power reflected on his previous behavior:

*I realized that probably others would think I was too contentious and unreasonable back then (Power, 101).*

Before the CT, Power was with a giant SOE in telecommunication industry with a big bargaining power, He had no needs to worry about the business. So he saw
all gifts giving and dinner invitation as bribes. After experiencing the unevenness and hard time as an entrepreneur, he understood the hardship of doing business without the protection of a big SOE, and then changed his mindset and behavior in doing business, which he described as doing business like a real businessman (Power, 132).

Considering the reality that the telecommunications industry in China is dominated by SOEs, it may not need “real business skills” as in a free market. But being an entrepreneur, Power realized that he has to meet the role expectation as a real businessman in a free market.

Jesse and Tong reported their experiences with expanded management scopes, responsibilities, and shifts in emphasis of management roles after the transition.

*I used to lead a team of three to five people. But on this position I have to oversee twelve directors, each leading a separate team in a different industry. I realized as an executive, my major responsibility was to coordinate and determine the direction, not to do detailed controlling* (Jesse, 064).

*In a large company like my previous employer, I spent most of my time and energy on internal issues. When I moved to this small start-up, I realized I had to obtain outside information and knowledge constantly. My job content had been extended* (Tong, 085).

Sharon learned the differences between her current role as a headhunter and her previous position as an HR manager through observing her peers.

*The role of a consultant is quite different from that of an internal HR person. This shift for me had been critical from the beginning. Initially (Sharon, 065). I behaved the same way as an HR Manager. I spent an hour and a half to interview a candidate, checking off each item of the person’s experience and skills, trying to find a match to the client’s requirements, which had always been the focus for an internal HR person (Sharon, 066). But, I later noticed that other consultants only spent half the time for an interview (Sharon, 067). I realized the focus of interviews was different for a consultant. The key here was to find out*
how motivated the candidate was. Another difference was that an HR consultant’s hourly rate was much higher (Sharon, 068).

For some managers, immersing into the new role was not an easy journey. A number of them had experienced difficulties in the assimilation process. Power described how he suffered in changing himself into an entrepreneur:

I didn’t expect so many difficulties. I lost much of my savings and got into debt. I suffered a lot emotionally. I had never experienced such downtime before. It was horrible (Power, 086)

Ling recalled her difficulties in coping with the new role in a POE after her first transition:

When I first started with this POE, I could not adapt to the changes in mindset. It was quite different from what I had expected. In two weeks, I felt I couldn’t continue. Because in an SOE, you were respected and appreciated by colleagues for what you contributed although you were serving others. But here, even though you were working hard, they would think it was what you were supposed to do, because you were paid for that, and you had to work hard. It was totally a different mindset. I felt it was hard to continue (Ling, 078).

According to Ling, it was rare for managers to be successful if transitioning between two different ownership systems.

I was the only manager successfully assimilated into this company externally. Other managers were all internal promoted. Why was that? It was the culture. Most managers were from SOEs, but the system worked more like a POE that they could not get used to (Ling, 152).

In contrast, a few managers considered their assimilation a smooth one. For instance, previously with a large MNC as a financial manager, Helen joined a mid-sized local company and was promoted to finance director with an expanded management scope. She described her new career:

Even though the workload was heavy in the POE, it was already much better than my previous MNC, at least I didn’t have to put in endless overtime to work with US headquarters in a different time zone. And the interpersonal relationships in big companies were always complicated, you know. It was much simpler here (Helen, 036).
It seemed that the level of difficulty in the role adjustment encountered by the managers was not only dependent on the changes in management scopes, but also on differences between the pre-transition organization and the post-transition organization in terms of size, business model, and organizational culture.

In order to deal with the new environment, Gong even developed his coping strategies.  

*I realized that when you enter a new company, you must know how to position yourself. I preferred to observe for the first three months, only observing, no talking. It was the most secure way to survive this period* (Gong, 097).

**Career Transition Outcomes**

In presenting the findings in the transition outcome categories, I differentiate tangible outcomes from intangible ones. Both were important for the interviewees’ current and future careers.

**Tangible Outcomes**

Career transition appeared to be rewarding for most managers from observable aspect. A number of them received an immediate promotion and moved upward on the career ladders. These include Jun, Tong, Helen, Lindsey, and Susan. Three managers, Sheng, Ling, and Gong, reported that they accepted lower positions at least on the job titles. A primary reason for Ling was due to her transition from a small organization to a large one. Sheng and Gong accepted a lower position because of their transitions into a new industry.

From a compensation perspective, fifteen managers reported either a comparable or higher salary after their most recent transitions. Only one manager,
Zheng, mentioned that her earning reduced after the transition. The changes in earnings were not comparable for the remaining six managers as they became either self-employed entrepreneurs or independent consultants without fixed income.

Another tangible outcome was that managers have launched their careers in different industries or ownership systems. Among the twenty-two managers, sixteen transitions occurred across system boundaries. Eighteen were across industries. Seven managers changed their occupations. A particular case was Sheng, whose most recent career transition was across industries and ownership systems at the same time.

Meanwhile, four managers started their entrepreneurial careers and two others became independent consultants. Table 7 summarizes the observable outcomes as reported by the managers.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observable Outcome</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotion at hiring</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demotion at hiring</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition across system</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNC to POE</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNC to SOE</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POE to SOE</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POE to MNC</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOE to POE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition across industry</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent consultant</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intangible outcomes: Intrinsic career development

While tangible outcomes reflect the observable career changes interviewees achieved, the intangible outcomes mirrored managers’ experience of intrinsic career development. All managers in this study have reported the development of their intrinsic careers.

Intrinsic career is defined as knowledge, skills, ability and experience related to one’s career development (Yang, Worchel, & Worhr, 1998). The development of intrinsic careers mentioned by the managers were multi-dimensional, including extended career exposure, acquired knowledge in industry, organizational systems, business operations, self-knowledge, self-confidence, professional competencies and expertise, environmental adaptability, and ability to deal with uncertainty. Table 8 summarized the findings into three dimensions, namely, professional growth, skills and competencies, and self-recognition.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Open codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional growth</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills and competencies</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-recognition</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professional growth. As a result of career transitions, managers inevitably increased their exposure to the evolving nature of the Chinese economy and related career alternatives. Hence, many of them expanded their understanding of business
and organizations and experienced professional growth. In Yong’s words, he had “widened and expanded professional insight” after the transitions (Yong, 060).

Sheng provided a typical case. From a tangible perspective, He changed his career from a decision maker, deputy general manager at an SOE to a team leader (project manager) at a share-holding investment POE in financial industry. After ten years of smooth upward movement in a secure SOE environment, he wanted to experience the turbulence in the financial market. His change in career role was obvious and clear in his own words:

*Only this year alone, I have experienced so many different things. I not only learned new knowledge and skills, but also expanded my perspectives to look at a company. I realized investment bankers needed different perspectives to examine a company than those working in business operations* (Sheng, 072).

Professional growth though turbulent changes and challenges were also echoed by Tong from his experience in the new career:

*A fast-growing entrepreneurial company brought me more challenges. Uncertainty and ongoing changes have been constant. That means working here is both challenging and rewarding. I needed to focus on specific aspects of the company. Applying my past approaches would not work here because of its constant change* (Tong, 039).

Through reflection, managers improved their understanding of their previous career experiences. Becoming an entrepreneur after the transition, Mary was able to understand her previous boss and also adjusted her work attitude later on when she switched back to be a professional manager:

*I’m more realistic now and can understand my previous bosses better. I now understand his worries and his pressures. Through my recent experience I knew it was not easy to be a boss. I have to worry about my employees’ livelihood the first thing in the morning* (Mary, 145).

*My focus now is to focus on my responsibilities, and do not take organizational politics personally. I only care about my work, and take in all feedback, positive or negative. I’m detached* (Mary, 166).
Jesse did not stay long with a company immediately before the most recent transition. He recalled how his view of the previous transition changed at different point of time.

_Actually I was very disappointed of myself when I quit from that company. I thought I was useless. I had always tried to blame the company with all kinds of excuses._ (Jesse, 081)..._After two years, I realized that the problems were mine. I overlooked a fundamental difference between MNCs and POEs_ (Jesse, 082).

Sheng reported new understanding of his previous role in the organization:

_If I had a chance to go back to food wholesale industry, I would never do the same. I would pay more attention to company policy. From investment banker’s perspective, company policy is so important that all responsibilities, roles, and benefits of stakeholders are all specified there_ (Sheng 092).

Apparently, managers learned to take a different lens reflecting on their previous experiences and developed their professional maturity. Also, through experiencing differences and challenges in business and organizations with their role adjustment, they also reported improved adaptability to change and uncertainty. Gong commented on his change in this area.

_My feeling now is that I can adapt to different culture, no matter what it is, private or multinational. Of course I know it will not be comfortable in the beginning, such as my last one, but I have realized that as a professional manager, I have to accept change._ (Gong, 082).

Ling echoed:

_My experience with SOEs and POEs made me more adaptable to different types of organizations, such as this company_ (Ling, 156).

Sharon experienced many changes during her transition and believed those changes had helped her grow professionally:

_It was quite an exercise in my professional life, the change in my professional field, functional area, reporting line, and performance, as well as personal feelings, plus other related issues such as I hired team members but were moved to another team. All these directly add to my_
professional maturity. I’ve never experienced so many changes in a year like this before. I felt I became more mature through all these (Sharon, 175).

A number of managers reported their professional growth through multiple career transitions. Ling was an example:

*The first time it took me to the market, because at the time I knew little about the job market, still using personal guanxi. I had no ideas about job fairs, internet job search, let alone headhunters. If I knew about these things, I wouldn’t go with that small POE* (Ling, 147).

Ling had a much clearer thought during the second transition:

*The second time I realized that there was a big market for my talent and that I had to move higher. I would move higher. Just like climbing stairways, I already stepped up to mid-level. It made no sense to go downward* (Ling, 148).

Managers’ professional growth also demonstrated through their increased understanding of differences between ownership systems. The existing multiple ownership systems in China have created both frustrations and tremendous career opportunities to Chinese managers. Managers experienced transitions across the system boundaries inevitably developed an understanding of the differences between the systems. A number of managers shared their analyses of the ownership systems based on their career experiences and observations.

Jesse, worked for eight years in MNCs, and experienced inter-system transitions twice, commented on the system differences between POEs and MNCs.

*...MNCs have well developed home systems they copied in their China operations. I was in a perfect system from day one. But it was unrealistic trying to copy MNC procedures to a private company at an early stage of development.* (Jesse, 083).

Jun echoed with his experience:

*My understanding was that POEs have more flexible structure and evolving responsibilities. It means even you had a same job title, you*
may have totally different responsibilities and authorities in different POEs. Regardless of your job function, specialization, or responsibilities, everyone could be placed in a totally different role or functional area whenever it is needed (Jun, 075).

Helen further criticized the POE culture as:

Chinese culture puts too much emphasis on flexibility and completely disregards standard. Too much flexibility could ruin a good plan. By working in MNCs, I learned that to be successful, you first need to have a logical process, you can revise it later, but even the revised process should be consistent with the original one. If you jump from one way to another without explaining the underlining logic, it is hard for your subordinates to follow. The lack of consistency from internal policy to business strategy, is always the weakness of POEs, but (it) is important for a company to survive (Helen, 104).

Harry shared his observations on the leadership in SOEs:

In Chinese companies, the leadership mindset was that if I could not control well, I’d rather not do it. They just wanted to keep things in their hands (Harry, 060). What they valued the most and what attracted them the most of professional managers was work ability and outcome performance. But at the same time they feared most was losing control of powers (Harry, 062).

With five years of human resource management experience in a large POE, Cindy shared her observation of the evolving culture in POEs.

…at the same time, this was an enterprise that needed to normalize and integrate itself frequently because of its merger and acquisition activities. Each newly acquired subdivision came with a different organization culture. How to establish an integrated HR system and how to blend and reconcile different organization cultures into an integrated one? This is a complex process (Cindy, 023).

Managers also shared the challenges and role changes they faced when they moved from one ownership system to another.

The key in a POE was that your boss requires a rapid growth (in performance), but you were held back by a shortage of resources.
Comparing with MNCs, the bigger problem POEs were suffering was lack of resources. One was relational resources; the other was monetary resources (Susan, 050).

There were significant differences between ownership systems. In POEs I first need to understand what the boss wants and I have to be loyal to my boss so even if I screw up, I’ll still have other opportunities, endless opportunities (Hang, 038). But in MNCs, like my previous company, if my performance worsened, I’d have to leave (Hang, 039).

Jun expressed his understanding of different requirements by POEs and MNCs for professional managers:

Actually it was not easy to be a professional manger in a POE because the context and standards were quite different. POEs needed management talents not only for showcase...well some were, but also for building up the entire structure from bottom up. The reality was that most POEs did not have a clear structure given their short history, quick expansion, and limited management resources. The newly hired managers were required to build up this structure. Maybe during this process, the whole system looks ugly, but it was ok as long as there was no big problem in the design and the overall framework. Many managers failed to continue their careers with POEs, especially those came from MNCs. They only knew how to follow an established process but failed to create new processes from ground up with implicit rules (Jun, 084).

Also experienced POEs, Hang elaborated his perspective in the following paragraph:

I learned being is more important than doing. Actually culture in most local companies was focused on being (Hang, 041). For example, all the senior managers in that company were not recruited, but were referred through guanxi. They follow a model of “on board first, perform second” (Hang, 042). Unlike MNCs, they wouldn’t ask about your business experience, or your past positions. They do not do that, at least not for senior positions (Hang, 043). They’d first chat with you about your ideas about life, personal interests and hobbies to find out the kind of person you are. If you match their requirements on these aspects, ok, go on board. As for what position, we'll talk later (Hang, 044).
Interestingly, Hang gradually internalized the above culture orientation as his own value:

As I got older, I increasingly value the principle of being. What do you depend on in life? You depend on friends, depend on your reputation. Who can make you succeed? It's your circle of your friends (Hang, 045).

While the managers interviewed reflected on their career transition journey, most of them took it as “a learning process” (Mary, 172). The cycle of trial – failure – learning was evident. Data in this sub-category also served to reinforce the managers’ professional growth.

Twelve managers reported that their career transitions were accomplished through guanxi relationships. However, some later realized that it was not always an effective approach. For example, Ling stated:

Being introduced by my guanxi has some downsides. Many details of the new positions may not be clarified due to mianzi (face) and trust issues. If I could choose now, I’d rather go through formal channels (Ling, 149).

Sheng found a big gap between what he expected and what he found when he went on board. He realized that it was not always good to be introduced by guanxi relationship.

What I was told and what we were really doing were quite different. When I arrived, this company did not have a clear structure and no clear reporting lines. I was frustrated about understanding my responsibility in the beginning (Sheng, 033).

Zheng was in a similar situation. She was talked into the transition by her trusted guanxi. Shortly after she was on board, that guy left the company and she began to realize the “truth”.

I did not expect such a big difference. I lost a lot of benefits. And what was more disappointing was that some of my colleagues told me later,
“if I knew you before you came, I’d tell you the truth and would not suggest you to come” (Zheng, 022).

Sheng further reflected:

Now I realized that being introduced by guanxi could be a double-edged sword. On one hand, you may face less pressure before joining the company. On the other hand, it was sort of a lottery, because your trust was your only bet. In fact, that guy left the company soon after I joined. Looking back, I’m now convinced that it was really a decision in a hurry (Sheng 059).

Some managers learned the importance of controlling their emotions when making career decisions. Particularly, Mary expressed her regret about her emotional resignation.

If it happened now, I would never think of leaving. I can take much more than that. I really regretted for leaving a great company. I gradually learned that no company was perfect and that individuals should not influence your attitude and your emotions. (Mary, 065).

Similarly, Xi stated:

I realized I was too impulsive and emotional when I made career decisions. Now I understand I need to keep personal emotions out. I did not make a rational decision (Xi, 180).

Mary also shared her lesson in relation to mianzi during her transitions.

Now I don’t think mianzi would be that important, especially after being a boss myself. I used to care too much about how others felt about me (Mary 153) … Now I think I’ll just do my best. If the boss was still unhappy, blaming me would be ok. It’s something I can live with. But at that time, if I was blamed by the boss, I had to leave because I cared too much (Mary, 154).

Jesse reflected on his transition from an MNC to a POE and summed up his lesson:

I would not recommend managers moving from an MNC to a POE. The reason is that in MNCs, employees are defined as parts of a machine and tasks are specialized. They are not expected to complete an entire product individually. But in POEs, managers are not specialized, instead, they are expected to design and produce the entire product (Jesse, 087).
While not directly related to a particular career transition, Jun stated his career development strategy in the following way.

*I realized that I needed to think of my career like operating a business. Your only resource is the 24 hours you can control. If you think of yourself as an enterprise, you need to know how to invest these 24 hours and make it most profitable* (Jun, 131).

Obviously, different managers learned differently from their career transitions. Their experiences facilitated their professional growth and have served as a developmental tool for facilitating a better understanding of careers and professional lives that will bring them to the next career stage.

**Skills and competencies.** Coupled with expanded career exposure and professional maturity, managers also acquired new skills and competencies. Hang was explicit about this:

*I learned how to build a team, and more importantly, how to coordinate and lead a team* (Hang, 036).

Having planned for the transition from an internal HR manager to an external consultant, Wen learned purposefully:

*In those two years, my biggest learning was in two areas. First was that I learned consulting approaches; second, I learned a lot training tools and methods* (Wen, 135)… *The most important thing was that I learned how to apply the tools in the business reality* (Wen, 137).

Yong found an opportunity to practice what he had learned from his MBA education:

*With this organization I began to work on new areas in investment, financing, budgeting, and forecasting. It was a great opportunity to practice what I had learned from my MBA program* (Yong, 058).

Transitioned from a POE to a MNC in a similar professional role of finance manager, Rong improved her competencies by learning standard procedures:
I have learned so much in this MNC. They have standards for each professional position. Everything was standardized I mean, the whole system. It was wonderful! I began to know as a finance manager, what I should do and, what I should not do, and why they had these standards. They are very useful for my future career (Rong, 122).

With previous experience in training in a MNC and as a senior manager in a POE, Jesse was able to perform his current role by combining what he had learned on earlier ones:

Nowadays I know what kind of training is important and have to be done. Because of my experiences on both sides (external trainer and internal management), it was quite easy for me to do training needs assessment. Just like if you never catch a cold, you will never know what the feeling it is like (Jesse, 076).

Tong shared his learning from a similar perspective:

My experience with a large established company and a startup gave me better understanding of organizations at different development stages. These experiences are essential to my future career either as an HR consultant or a freelance trainer (Tong, 099)

Rong and Hang expressed their proud of expanded skills and competencies as a result of the transition.

I accumulated significant experience in financial analysis. I can do analysis for events, productions, and projects. No matter what industry I enter in the future, be it IT, media, or manufacturing, they would all need my skills; they would need to know what constitute major costs and how to control it. It is exactly what I’m equipped with (Rong, 147).

It was great that I gained experience in sales and marketing. It was a valuable addition to my skill sets, and provided a shortcut toward my career development (Hang, 030).

Career transitions also allowed managers to accumulate job search and negotiation skills, especially for those who worked in SOEs.

If I wish to make a change now, I would definitely know how to communicate with potential employers about job title, compensations and benefits. I also know how to communicate my strengths and the value I could bring, not as muddleheaded as the first time (Yong, 059).
I did not know how to apply for a job before coming to that MNC. I was always referred by others, such as friends, colleague, and other guanxi (Rong, 119). I knew how to prepare my resume and to deal with interviews from then on (Rong, 120).

Managers quit from SOEs for the first time reported comparatively low level of skills and ability to search for an ideal job, not to mention how to deal with interviews. After experiencing failures and successes in job searching and interviews, they gradually build up competences in such career development activities.

**Self-recognition.** Career transitions contributed to developing managers’ self-knowledge regarding their own value systems, career potentials, personalities, and related strengths and weaknesses. Rong was clear about this outcome:

*Now I know I am a task oriented manager. I’m better at dealing with tasks than people management. I do not fit well with a position requiring more interpersonal skills than technical expertise* (Rong, 149).

Sheng described the transition as a journey of learning about himself:

*I didn’t know what I worried about before this career transition. I didn’t know what I was lacked. Now I have experienced confusion and challenges. Those were things I needed to experience to better understand myself* (Sheng, 069).

Jesse further compared his self-recognition before and after career transitions and found his change during the transition:

*I knew a long time ago that I was good at following up, but not good at exploring new business. (Jesse, 039) When I was with the MNC, my boss talked to me many times and wanted me to do a sales related job. But I refused every time because I did not want to do it (Jesse, 040).*

*But after these experiences, now I find that I am good at sales. I felt comfortable talking with clients. I found myself often surpassing my own expectations* (Jesse, 041)
Yu took the transition as a journey of self-exploration:

*It made me understand more about myself, about what I want, what I’m capable of doing, and what I enjoy doing* (Yu, 070)

Cindy shared a similar understanding:

*It was a process of exploring myself, it meant I had to answer the following questions, Who am I, why it happened to me, what I should do, what is best for me, and what I really want* (Cindy, 139).

As a group of highly educated and experienced professionals, it was apparent that the managers had constantly reflected on and evaluated their career transition experiences. They were honest about their perceived successes and failures during the career transitions. For instance, Yu stated:

*I had a strong feeling that I finally found what I wanted to do. It seemed like I took a long journey to get here* (Yu, 068).

Cindy felt fortunate for taking action at the right time:

*Look back, it was the right decision at the right time, you know. I cashed in my stock option and got enough money to start my own business. It was what I needed to do* (Cindy 115).

Some felt hesitant in claiming a success, such as Tong:

*This transition has been smooth so far. ....It is still too early to tell if it’s successful. I have too many things to do* (Tong 047).

Meanwhile, a few managers seemed less satisfied with their transitions. Xi mentioned:

*I was too naïve. It was not a wise decision. I should care less about what others think (Xi, 181)... I should have stayed until I got my MBA. What I really needed was just to switch my emphasis a little to the MBA studies. Actually the company supported me to get the degree.....I did not think it through* (Xi, 144).

Zheng thought there were other options she might have pursued before making the final decision.

*I realized it was a mistake not to explore internally first. I didn’t explore internal options when I was looking for opportunities. In a
meeting with the big boss before leaving, I was reminded of internal opportunities (Zheng, 011).

Power considered the timing of his transition was premature:

*Think back, I was not well prepared to go out and start my own business, in areas such as network recourses and client acquisition, and even my mindset, none was quite ready* (Power, 091)... *It would have been better if I stayed for a little longer* (Power 094).

Based on the increased self-recognition, Interviewees demonstrated different level of confidence toward their career future during the interview. Most perceived gaining more confidence from the transition experiences. Rong expressed confidence about her career with the current organization:

*I believe that I won’t have problems renewing my contract with the current company after the three year term* (Rong, 123).

Jesse showed his confidence in the training profession:

*There are three stages in China domestic training market. The first stage is expert type, college professor type trainers; the second stage is specialist type, like managers from MNCs. They accept specialized training from MNCs. But there are still problems. The third stage, trainers with both real work experience and professional training. I have both experiences. That means I have an absolute advantage in this field* (Jesse, 067).

Tong expressed his confidence in his career future:

*Although the brand name I am attached to was not as big as my previous employer, but I think I am better positioned for my future career. From my personal career development perspective, the space is much broader* (Tong, 084).

Gong added that:

*I am more confident after this experience. Because I have experienced the biggest challenge, moving from a MNC to a quite different company in a different industry, and what is more, it is a family business* (Gong, 077).

In contrast, a few managers were not as confident about their career future after experiencing transitions. Xi was an example:
In the past four years, my only success was in the MP3 business. Everyone knew what I could accomplish. I do not know when I can find another launch pad for my career. It’s been really hard to find a right place. (Xi, 170).

Sheng also considered his transition across industries less than ideal:

I was not ready to work in the financial field. It required special expertise and intense knowledge. I couldn’t catch up in a short time (Sheng, 039).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the major findings of the study from open coding guided by the three research questions. First, dissonance with five environment factors and three specific personal aspirations were found to be the major determinants of VCTs experienced by the research participants. Second, a five-step VCT process was identified, including decision to quit, career planning, contemplating external opportunities, career choice, and assimilation into the new role. Third, tangible and intangible outcomes of VCTs were summarized in major categories. The findings through open coding analysis have displayed substantial variances in perceptions, feelings, behavioral and cognitive processes of the participants during VCTs.
CHAPTER FIVE
SELECTIVE AND THEORETICAL CODING:
A THEORY OF VOLUNTARY CAREER TRANSITION IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT
AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the grounded theory method, this chapter presents the results from both the selective coding and the theoretical coding derived from the open coding in Chapter Four. This is to delimit the findings into conceptualized categories for theory development. I first present the patterns of voluntary career transitions (VCT) that have emerged from the data. I then compare the differences of VCT processes in the different patterns followed by a conceptualized theory of voluntary career transition in the Chinese context. Lastly, I conclude the study by discussing the implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

The Patterns of Voluntary Career Transition: The Grounded Theory

Theory development in career research has long followed a metaphoric approach since the beginning of career research. Career ladder (Hall, 1985), career anchor (Schein, 1990), protean career (Hall, 2004) and boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) are examples of the metaphoric rhetoric frequently found in career literature. The power of metaphor-based theory building lies in its potential to illustrate new understandings and reveal unrealized and obscured meanings (Arnold & Cohen, 2008).
Through inductive analysis based on the open coding and constant comparison, the distinctive patterns of VCTs have emerged. To express the patterns explicitly, I follow the metaphoric tradition to name the patterns. Specifically, the selective coding pointed to the following types of VCTs: (1) the shaken-out transition (SOT); (2) the try-out transition (TOT); (3) the launch-out transition (LOT); and (4) the climb-out transition (COT). All four types of VCT decisions and related processes are imbedded in the dynamic interactions between environmental factors and personal factors.

Prior to presenting the transition patterns as the result of selective coding, it is necessary to discuss an important concept revealed from the selective coding process; that is embeddedness. This concept is critical to understanding the nature and patterns of VCTs in the subsequent presentation. Michelle, Holton, Lee, Sablynski, and Erez (2001) introduced a construct of embeddedness for voluntary turnover research. Embeddedness is composed of (1) the fit between a person’s job and other important facets of life, (2) the ties an individual has with coworkers and work environment, and (3) the personal sacrifices one must face in the case of leaving one’s position (Michelle, et al., 2001). It has been posited that embeddedness minimizes the impact of employability on psychological mobility (DiRenzo & Greenhaus, 2011). In other words, when employees are highly embedded in their existing positions, they are less likely to take a VCT across organizational boundaries because the potential transition requires embedded employees to make greater personal sacrifices and to break strong ties in their career environment. Therefore, embeddedness creates psychological barriers to successful career transitions.
The Shaken-out Transition (SOT)

The shaken-out transition (SOT) is one essentially driven by perceived dissonance with the external environment factors. Those involved in the SOT often found themselves in a pressing situation with incompatible systems and related factors, and they might have felt they were being forced to take a VCT. This type of transition showed the following properties. First, the direct reasons for the SOT were perceived or experienced dissonance between a manager and the organizational context or environment, such as turbulent changes in organizational ownership or management, a breach in the psychological contract, or a serious conflict with the direct boss. Second, managers in this group tended to be weakly imbedded in the organization in terms of personal ties and attachment to the workplace. Third, the pace of the decision making for the shaken-outs was often hasty because the pressing situation forced the individual to focus on resolving the imminent problem immediately. Hence, the problem-solving nature of the SOT frequently limited the individual's ability to deliberate on his or her decision concerning a career future.

Given the above properties, the SOT, while it may appear to have been voluntary on the surface, was indeed an involuntary one because the manager involved may have felt he or she was without other choices and had to leave. Therefore, the SOT in fact was a career decision under a somewhat desperate situation with limited alternatives. For instance, Mary left her previous organization hastily due to a severe conflict with her direct supervisor. She felt she had to leave under the circumstances.

...Everyone could see that from the way he treated me. I couldn't take that anymore and I had to leave (Mary, 055).

Under this circumstance, managers typically were already less involved in job assignments. They felt less valued and were weakly embedded in the existing system
with a strong pressure to escape from it. Therefore, they felt they had to make a VCT
decision quickly. Some even quit compulsively without careful deliberation.

In fact, at the time, I made this decision out of rage, to some extent. I
didn’t mean it when I said that (Hang, 078). Well, I said I was leaving. So,
I had to go (Hang, 079).

Guanxi networks played an important role in facilitating the SOTs and had a
major influence on the managers’ decision-making. The shaken-outs tended to rely on
their guanxi network as a primary approach in searching of career alternatives. Given the
urgency, managers were unable to collect sufficient information about the new career
opportunities. They tended to trust the guanxi and made decisions in a short time period,
such as seen in the experiences of Hang and Sheng.

In the data, the SOTs were found in all three types of ownership systems, state-
owned enterprises (SOEs), foreign-owned enterprises (FOEs), and privately-owned
enterprises (POEs). Moreover, the SOT appeared to be related to a certain career stage.
Managers in their early careers seemed to be more likely to face this type of radical
transition. Another commonality of the SOTs was that managers showed limited self-
knowledge at the transitioning point. This might be because they had comparatively
smooth career experiences previously and lacked experience in dealing with complex
career situations and problems. It might also be the case that due to their early career
success, they were used to being praised and admired, and were too proud to suffer losing
faces due to a critical incidence, as Mary stated.

I was too young to take that situation… when we were young. I guess we
were too emotional and considering too much about what others say…
(Mary, 294).
Examining the process of the SOT, the shaken-outs had not identified career alternatives prior to making a decision to quit when facing a perceived dissonance with the organizational system. They relied on their guanxi network and often took the first available opportunity for the transition, a precarious one. Because of the hasty action, they did not have enough time to gather sufficient information about the new opportunity for a thorough assessment. Consequently, they tended to face unexpected difficulties in assimilating into their new careers, resulting in later regrets about the decisions after a short period of time in the new careers. Alternatively, the SOT could also positively affect a manager’s self-confidence and trigger one’s effort in developing and learning about the self. As shown in the data, managers in this category had learned the importance of controlling the affective self and examined their current and future career opportunities closely before making a decision, like Xi stated,

*I should care less about what others think* (Xi, 181)... *what I really needed was just to switch my emphasis a little* (Xi, 144).

**The Try-out Transition (TOT)**

This type of transition is characterized by pursuing a VCT without a definitive career objective or direction; instead, it is simply driven by career aspirations. Managers in this category seemed to have a certain degree of a dissonance with the career environment, such as the organization, the job characteristics, or the career preference to the industry. They had a desire for new careers, but were not sure about their goals for the transitions. They believed in the idea that there should be better careers for them somewhere else. Therefore, the TOT was exploratory in nature.

With a number of years in the routines and fixed job responsibilities, managers appeared to be bored and less satisfied with their existing jobs. Over time, they further
discovered discrepancies between their personal traits and the routine tasks, which affected their organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Coupled with perceived limited internal opportunities, these managers were eager to seek more exciting career opportunities outside the organization and explore their potentials. Rong was bored with her work and workplace environment in an SOE, and she felt her personality as a specialist was not appreciated by the company, so she moved to a small private company to test the water.

For managers in this group, either positive or negative events may have triggered their intention for a VCT. Some began to think about a VCT upon experiencing an expanded job role or a short-term assignment as Jesse experienced. The new exciting experience allowed the managers to see other aspects of their capacity in a different career setting, and hence it generated an interest in exploring their potentials. In other words, their intention for a VCT was based on an improved but limited understanding of the self. Furthermore, the TOT could also be induced by external opportunities. The data showed that the managers had already experienced a decline in job satisfaction along with career fatigue prior to the presence of external opportunities. They tended to agree that it was a joint force of pull and push that propelled them for a VCT decision. Therefore, unlike the pull theory (Mobley, 1982), I found that system factors as a “push” factor were always in presence even for the “pull out” career transitions.

The TOT had the following properties suggested by the data. First, it was often associated with a stable career status within larger organizational systems such as multinational companies or SOEs. The reason was, as confirmed by Jesse and Rong, that in a large organization, the jobs are well structured with responsibilities defined in fixed
task domains with less flexibility. Second, managers in SOEs were not familiar with VCT as they were never exposed to external career opportunities to proactively pursue a professional career elsewhere. In Rong’s words,

...in SOEs, employees are supposed to be serving as “a screw on a machine,” and a shining one wherever one is assigned. One’s career is always subject to the Communist Party’s objectives (Rong, 299).

Consequently, the try-outs from SOEs were not familiar with the nature of the external job market and often fell short of strategies to deal with the changes in VCTs. In fact, with the job security and stability at an SOE system, managers were not sure about what they could do if separated from the system, and they were uncertain about their future careers outside the system.

Third, the try-outs were often well embedded in the pre-transition organization, not only in the work environment, but also as related to other facets of life in the SOE system such as housing, child care, or schooling. Accordingly, it was not a surprise to see that the try-outs tended to regret their career transition decisions after a short period of time. Due to a lack of sufficient information and knowledge about their new career role, especially when encountering unexpected challenges, the try-outs tended to regret their VCT decisions. Ling expressed her intention during her second try-out transition.

I thought about going back. My old office was still available; they were waiting for me to go back (Ling, 149).

Given the hesitant nature of TOT, the managers involved were often impelled by external opportunities or individuals. In Ling’s case, the founder was a key person for her transition as she put it, “she was the only person I could not argue with.” For Zheng, she was attracted by external opportunities and talked into the transition by one of her previous colleagues. The hesitant and exploratory nature of TOT determined that the try-
outs were susceptible to the influence of their guanxi network during the decision-making process.

Because of the exploratory nature, the try-outs were not able to prepare sufficiently before making the move. Thus, they tended to suffer unexpected difficulties and challenges. Instead of planning for the long-term, they often took the transitions as an opportunity to test their potential without a clear direction. Therefore, the outcome of the TOT was found to be mixed. Some resulted in doubts about themselves with reduced confidence in their career pursuits. Others realized their potentials and turned the transition into a launch-out one, which is presented as below.

**The Launch-out Transition (LOT)**

The launch-out transition (LOT) is an evolving and progressive process guided by a clear career goal. The LOT has its unique properties compared to other types of transitions.

First, in the LOT, the perceived discord with the pre-transition environment was coupled with reflections and confirmations of one’s knowledge about the self in value orientation and career interests. In other words, the launch-outs identified their true selves in their careers while confirming the mismatch between the self and the expected role in the organization. For instance, experiencing a conflict between the expected functional role and her personal values, Cindy realized that her personal values were in decision-making autonomy and the opportunity to help others. These values were translated into her career goal for the subsequent transition.

Similar to the try-out managers, both positive and negative experiences can encourage the LOT. While a negative experience of role conflict provoked reflections and
confirmation of perceived mismatch, positive experiences facilitated the discovery of self-potential and induced a re-evaluation of the person-environment match. Sharon began to consider a transition upon being involved in two large merger and acquisition (M&A) projects. The contrast between the daily routines and the excitement during the challenging projects elicited her thoughts on pursuing a career with greater accomplishment in the business setting instead of her routine HR supporting function. The mental process involved prior to the transition makes the LOT a journey of self-discovery.

Second, if considering the try-outs as testing their potentials by looking for changes from their previous careers, the launch-out managers were in search of career opportunities to re-establish themselves. Their transition decisions may not have been directly induced by the environmental factors. Rather, the launch-outs were more self-driven and value-centered. During the LOT, they shared a common desire of regaining control over their career lives. This is consistent with research on midlife career changes (e.g., Weathers, 1976). Another common focus among this group of managers was the desire to be true to self and do things meaningful for their careers. For example, Yu liked his job mentoring others. He took great pride in seeing his efforts paid off when his mentees were successfully developed into managers. But, to him, doing what he was interested in was not enough. He preferred more autonomy in his career. In his view, both the direct boss and the CEO’s management style interfered with his desired autonomy.

Third, compared to the previous two types, pursuing alternative careers in the LOT process was more systematic; it took a longer time and had more deliberations. The launch-outs would not take any random opportunity, but searched for the right ones that
fit their career goals and interests. Almost all managers in this group took a significant amount of time and deliberation to job search. Given the cultural context, the guanxi network was also an inevitable component in their quest. However, they never fell under the influence of guanxi when they made important VCT decisions. For instance, Yu was offered an alternative by his long-time professional guanxi. He pondered the option for some time and eventually turned down the offer after his analysis on the person-environment match.

Being systematic does not mean there are no difficulties in the LOT. However, the launch-outs were flexible and realistic, and willing to constantly adjust their search criteria for new career opportunities. For example, failing to identify companies headquartered in Beijing, Sharon extended her search to different industries, but still in vain. She then compared the roles of the internal versus external HR functions and decided to move to the headhunting industry for an external HR career.

Furthermore, the LOT involved an intra-role transition because the transition often entailed self-recognition, self-identification, and self-adjustment in career orientation (Louis, 1980). This led the transitioners to reshape their career paths and reposition themselves. Meanwhile, the launch-outs were equally likely to encounter difficulties when immersed into the new environment. Yet, they had a higher level of motivation and persistence in dealing with the challenges. Given their strong career aspirations, they were determined to assimilate into the new roles once a decision was made. The LOTs were found by managers originated from both POEs and FOEs, but not from SOEs.
The Climb-out Transition (COT)

The climb-out transition is for the purpose of career advancement with a predefined goal. Compared to those in other types, the climb-out managers were less concerned with their disjuncture with the pre-transition organization. Instead, they were more focused on career advancement according to their own goals. In Wen’s experience, he showed minimal distress on the dissonance with the organizations. Although he did express his dissatisfaction with the reward system and the limited career opportunities within the organization, it only accelerated his transition process and affected the timing of his decision, not the decision itself.

The climb-outs possessed the following three attributes. First, they made transition decisions by following a predefined career goal and career path, just like having a navigator in hand for a planned journey. Their decisions were concentrated on the when and how, though not often about the where. Unlike the launch-outs, they did not change their pre-determined career directions. For instance, Wen planned for a VCT every three years. He moved from an internal HR role to be an HR consultant in a consulting firm and later became an independent consultant following this plan. Because of the predetermined plan, the COT often does not involve in time-consuming deliberations and sophisticated considerations regarding resignation decisions as in the LOT.

Second, the launch-outs were typically prepared for the transitions and ready to move to an advanced career stage. In Jun’s case, he had acquired sufficient industry knowledge, organization information, and career resources as part of his plan for the transition amid the turbulent M&A actions among the three competing organizations. The
climb-outs were sensitive to external career opportunities and ready to embark on a transition when an opportunity that was consistent with their advancement objectives appeared. Meanwhile, they were less embedded in the pre-transition organization and reported low levels of frustration and confusion during the transitions.

Third, with the determined career goals, the climb-outs had a willingness to learn and adapt to the new environment during the transitions. They were more flexible and persistent in pursuing the established goals when dealing with difficulties and challenges in the transition. For example, unexpected industry reshuffling forced Tong to a medium-sized organization. He quickly assimilated to his role as an HR director and realized that the experience would add value to his future career in the HR field. Moreover, most climb-outs had experienced multiple career transitions within or across the ownership system boundaries. Their multiple career experiences not only allowed them to understand the contextual differences in different ownership forms, but also helped shape and confirm their career goals. The COT was found by managers from both POEs and FOEs, but seldom from SOEs.

In short, the climb-outs had strong career aspirations and determined career goals. They showed minimal disturbances due to dissension within the transitioning contexts and the environmental factors. The purpose of the COT was for career advancement through implementation of a predefined career plan that resulted from one’s earlier career interests, aspirations, and experiences. The outcomes of the transition often resulted in a higher level of confidence and professional growth.
Comparison of the VCT Patterns

Through constant comparative analysis, the variations of the VCT patterns reveal that the uniqueness of each pattern is grounded in the attributes of the managers’ during the VCT process. For the purpose of comparison, I group these attributes into three groups in Table 9. Group A includes the attributes of the managers in cognitive and affective aspects, Group B contains organization contextual properties, and Group C covers behavioral aspects during the managers’ VCT process. While all managers interviewed had experienced the same turbulent and unprecedented environmental changes in the Chinese transitioning context, their affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to career transitions displayed significant differences. This is first reflected on their perceived degrees of dissonance with the transitioning systems and related career environments. The SOT was directly caused by perceived or experienced severe dissonance, whereas the COT was motivated by strong career aspiration, which was not seen in the SOT. The differences in the perceived severity, to a certain degree, were caused by different degree of self-knowledge.

Consistent with their career aspirations, the climb-outs had a clear idea about their career directions and had developed career plans that moved them in those directions. Compared to the shaken-outs, with a similar fast-paced decision process, the climb-outs were much more determined and persistent in their career pursuits. In contrast, the shaken-outs were not aware of their directions, nor had they proactively planned for their future careers. This determined their subsequent reactive decisions when a career crisis took place. Given their limited career alternatives and problem-solving natures, the shaken-outs tended to be fast in the VCT decision-making. Their lack of career planning
and direction often resulted in a lack of career persistence at a later time, which was expressed in regrets about their career decisions.

Managers from different contexts of organizational ownership have displayed different degree of embeddedness. Both the shaken-outs and the climb-outs showed lower degree of embeddedness compared to the try-outs and the launch-outs. While managers originated from FOEs was found in all four types VCT, those from SOE systems only involved in SOTs and TOTs. On the other hand, managers from POEs were found in all types except for TOTs.

A unique feature of the TOTs was exploring career potentials under vague career objectives. As such, the try-outs were not as decisive as the climb-outs during transitions, but neither were they as desperate as the shaken-outs. With an exploratory nature, the TOT had a possibility of moving into the LOT once career interests and values were confirmed and related career goals and objectives were modified. Meanwhile, a distinctive feature of the LOT was career repositioning. Different from TOTs, the launch-outs took significant time for deliberation and planning in order to clarify and confirm their values and goals, and to compare them with the career alternatives at hand for decision-making. Their VCT process seemed to be more systematic compared to the try-out managers.

While the guanxi network was adopted as a primary channel for alternative careers by almost all the managers, the role it played differed greatly in the VCT types. The shaken-outs and try-outs relied on their guanxi networks not only in job search for generating career alternatives, but also in the final decision-making. They tended to trust their guanxi network and shuren’s judgment, and moved on to a guanxi-based career
Table 9

Properties of the VCT Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VCT Types</th>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived</td>
<td>Degree of</td>
<td>VCT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dissonance with</td>
<td>Self-knowledge</td>
<td>Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaken-outs</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try-outs</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launch-outs</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climb-outs</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
rather than collecting sufficient background information as a base for decision-making. For other VCT types, particularly the COT and the LOT, guanxi networking was adopted simply as a source to generate more career alternatives, and it had seldom influenced the managers’ final decisions.

Regardless of the multi-faceted cognitive, affective and behavioral factors involved in a VCT process, the components under Groups A and B in Table 9 indicate two important dimensions – the environmental dimension and the personal dimension. This allows further conceptualizing the complex VCT phenomenon under study. Figure 3 shows the two dimensions with respect to the patterns of VCTs.

Figure 3 The VCT Patterns: A Two Dimension View

The vertical dimension denotes the personal dimension, representing the degrees of influences from personal aspects in the career pursuits. The horizontal is the environmental dimension, representing the degrees of influences from environment
related to the organizational and industrial context. The four patterns of VCT located at different positions on the two dimensional plane describe various interactions between the two dimensions. Among the four types, the SOT is dependent on environmental factors the most while influenced by personal aspirations the least. To the other extreme, the COT relies heavily on personal factors, but the least to be affected by the environment.

The Voluntary Career Transition Process

The four patterns of VCT captured the similarity and differences in the processes and attributes of the interviewed managers. Based on the four VCT patterns described in Table 9, Figure 4 describes a general VCT process. The arrows with solid lines indicate the flow of the process while those with dotted lines show steps not observed in all types.

![Figure 4 Career Transition Process](image-url)
A VCT is often triggered by a dissonance with one’s career environment. It may be related to the organizational culture, one’s direct boss, the job characteristics, or one’s preference to an industry. With varied degrees of the individuals’ career aspirations, the dissonance, over time, may be translated to a resignation decision and a decision for alternative careers. For the decision-making, some deliberate on career alternatives with a job search plan before the final decision, such as the launch-outs and the climb-outs. Others act without a plan, like the shaken-outs. Guanxi is a primary channel for job search among interviewees, but its role differs significantly among different VCT types. Some managers, such as the try-outs, showed strong embeddedness with the pre-transition organization. After leaving the previous organization and moving to a new career platform, these managers make efforts to assimilate into their new roles. At this stage, the try-outs and shaken-outs often express regrets for the transitions. The transition process affects the managers’ professional growth, level of confidence, and skills and competencies.

Based on the typology of career transition in the Chinese context, and the analysis of the VCT patterns in Table 9 and Figure 3, an overarching core category is emerging. Sharing their joys, frustrations, confusions, and challenges, I realized that it was up to the managers to make sense of their own career experiences and, according to the interviews, most of them have experienced a significant change in self during the VCT. With repeated comparative analysis of the open codes and the selective codes, I identified the core category of this grounded theory study to be career authenticity. On the one hand, individuals with variant degrees of career authenticity may feel, perceive, think, and behave differently during the decision-making process and demonstrate different levels of
aspirations and persistence in the VCT process. On the other hand, purposefully or not, each VCT can be seen as a socially constructed and sense-making developmental process toward one’s higher degree of career authenticity.

A Grounded Theory of Voluntary Career Transition in the Chinese Context

The dictum of grounded theory research is “not to review literature in the substantive area under study” prior to the research (Glaser, 1992, p. 30). This is to avoid “contaminating, being constrained by, inhibiting, stifling, or otherwise impeding the researcher’s effort to generate categories, their properties, and theoretical codes from the data that truly fit” (p. 31). While I have presented an integrated literature review in Chapter 2 as part of the requirement in dissertation research, I understand that additional literature is required when I apprehend the data category thoroughly and “cannot be shaken from them.” It can only “sharpen them [the researcher] by better fitting ideas from the literature…” (p. 33). Therefore, the subsequent discussion is to be integrated with literature that has not been presented earlier.

The power of grounded theory is in its ability to conceptualize and abstract from observed data (Glaser, 2002). I combine the criteria of the grounded theory method with those of theory building outlined by Whetten (1989) regarding what, why, when, and who of a theory, and to construct a parsimonious theory of managerial VCT in the Chinese context. From open coding and selective coding, the theory is emerging and unfolding. Hence, I attempt to focus on theory construction and avoid what Glaser (2002) criticized, “endless description” of the raw data for theoretical coding (p. 29). I offer brief grounding sources during the discussion when data support is deemed necessary.
Core Category: Career Authenticity

The findings from the selective coding presented earlier have pointed to a core category; that is *career authenticity*. Authenticity first appeared in the literature as a philosophical construct. It signifies a specific way of dealing with the external environment (Trilling, 1972). Authenticity is often associated with attitudes of openness and receptivity toward the inner motives concerning the assessment of the moral worth of an action (Farrara, 2009). For example, if we describe someone as being authentic, we imply that the person is genuine and real without imitation. Since the 1950s, authenticity has been extended to psychological research (Rogers, 1959, 1980). In psychology, this concept refers to the effort in leading one's life based on the needs of the individual’s inner being rather than the environment pressure or one’s early conditioning (Rogers, 1980; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, and Joseph, 2008). It represents a certain way of dealing with the environment by being authentic to the self rather than external factors and by searching for an adequate understanding of the self, self-motivation, and meaning (Weigert, 2009). Research has shown that people with a high degree of authenticity are able to effectively control and maintain their premeditated roles and positions (Kuhl, 1986), to process information more acutely (Deci & Ryan, 1991), and to think more creatively (Amabile, 1996). Psychologists have also been engaged in developing measurement scales for psychological authenticity (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Wood, et al., 2008).

Recently, the concept of psychological authenticity has found its way into management literature. Initial management research on authenticity is focused on manufactured authenticity or authenticity work in creative industries, such as film-
making (Jones & Smith, 2005; Svejenova, 2005), advertising (Moeran, 2005), and luxury wine producing (Beverland, 2005). These studies have found that authenticity is a social and historical construct (Moeran, 2005; Svejenova, 2005). My additional literature search found only four related publications explicitly connecting authenticity to careers, including one in press (Leroy, Verbruggen, Forrier, & Sels, 2011, in press).

Briscoe, Hall, and Demuth (2006) introduced psychological authenticity to career research. Their study applied a scale of psychological authenticity (Shelton, et al., 1997) to measure MBA students’ protean and boundaryless career attitudes. The second empirical study applied a similar psychological authenticity scale by Wood, et al. (2008) for undergraduates’ career indecision in relation to career goal orientation and motivation (White and Tracey, 2010). Yet, no studies found in the literature have explicitly defined “career authenticity” other than borrowing the construct and related measurement from the psychological literature. This indicates that career authenticity has just begun to attract scholarly attention in career research.

In its most general sense, authenticity refers to the condition or quality of realness. Research on authenticity has focused on the following related attributes: acting in one’s own authority, being truthful to oneself, and being distinctive and coherent (Svejenova, 2005). Based on the rich career experiences shared by the interviewees in this study and combined with the literature, it appeared that the managers in this study were expressing their career transition experiences through a journey of exploring and discovering their career authenticity. Seemingly, they were at different stages of the journey, thus revealing significant variations in their perceptions of, attitudes toward, and experiences of the VCTs. Their journeys were ones that sought and clarified their true
careers and the realness of self. Therefore, career authenticity is deemed the core
category, or core construct, in this grounded theory study.

Formally, I define career authenticity as an orientation to live one’s career life
according to internal needs or calling, personal values, motivation, and interests rather
than the demands of the external environment or related system factors. Career
authenticity is not only one’s evolving state of being, but also a state of self-becoming in
the career context. Intentionally or not, career authenticity describes what I really want
from my career to be my true self through exploring and making sense of one’s career-
related realness by exercising personal aspirations and drives in dealing with a given
social, cultural, and organizational context.

A high degree of career authenticity implies that the individual has an established
career goal that represents one’s true realness of internal desire and intrinsic motivation.
External environments can hardly alter one’s career goal although one may encounter
difficulties and challenges in career pursuits. Authentic individuals are quite clear about
who they are and what they are doing. On the other hand, a low degree of career
authenticity refers to a situation where such persons are uncertain about their career
interests and values, and thus do not know what they are able to accomplish in the career
context.

The concept of career authenticity may appear to have a natural link to
individualism (Handler, 1986). Chinese culture has long been considered collectivism in
nature (Hofstede, 1993). Yet, recent literature has pointed to a general increase in
individualism within the Chinese workforce (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002;
Wright, Berrell, & Gloet, 2008) and a general agreement on the convergence of
individualism in organizations (Davis, 2000). While SOE systems may still be under the influence of collectivism, individualism orientation has risen in recent decades due to the nation becoming more open to the outside world. Particularly, individualism has been dominating in FOEs, and has critical influence in POEs by definition. Therefore, the emerging social and cultural environment has a strong impact on shaping the individualism orientation and thus individual’s career authenticity.

**The Properties of Career Authenticity**

It is important to note that the core concept of career authenticity discussed above is grounded in the data. Examining Table 9 from selective and theoretical coding, it is clear that columns under Group A, *perceived dissonance with environment, degree of self-knowledge*, and *career aspiration* represent different dimensions of career authenticity. Specifically, perceived dissonance with environment characterizes an individual’s sensitivity to external career environments. The degree of self-knowledge is attributable to one’s career identity. Career aspiration explains one’s career motivation and determination in a VCT. These concepts are different aspects of career authenticity.

Consequently, I conceptualize the properties of career authenticity into following three constructs: (1) career identity, (2) career aspiration, and (3) sensitivity to person-environment match.

**Career identity.** This property is derived from the degree of self-knowledge in selective coding. Self-knowledge is about one’s quest for the answer to who I am. Career identity is a configuration of meanings that reflects one’s own values, interests, and ability within acceptable career roles (Meijers, 1998). It refers to how one understands and defines oneself in career pursuits. One’s career identity develops over time, often
through multiple transitions. Wen repeatedly expressed his values in his career pursuit during his two VCTs. He held a strong belief in autonomy and the feeling of achievement in consulting. For Power, he had been clear that he was looking for freedom and social influence in entrepreneurship. In contrast, Rong had no idea about what her role could be outside the SOE system when she tried to explore new career opportunities.

Career identity involves making sense of one’s past and present career experiences. It provides a direction to one’s future career development as illustrated by the managers’ career transitions. Power’s reflective statement, “I had to do business like a real business man,” manifested his change in career identity after two VCTs. Implicitly, this dimension of career authenticity is imbedded in the process of constructing the meaning of one’s career experiences through reflective search for a new self. Consequently, career identity offers a cognitive foundation for the construct of career authenticity.

**Proposition 1. Career identity affects the type of VCT one takes.**

**Proposition 1a.** Managers with a vague career identity are more likely to engage in a shaken-out transition (SOT).

**Proposition 1b.** Managers in search of their career identities are more likely to engage in a try-out transition (TOT).

**Proposition 1c.** Managers in clarifying their career identities are more likely to engage in a launch-out transition (LOT).

**Proposition 1d.** Managers with an established career identity are more likely to engage in a climb-out transition (COT).

The organizational environment in which one pursues a career plays an
important role in shaping one’s career identities. As the data show, interviewees from an SOE system normally have a comparatively lower degree of self-knowledge, and they feel frustrated to see their career identity outside the system. In contrary, those who have experienced POEs or FOEs demonstrated a higher level of self-knowledge, including interests, values, and career needs. Given the different nature of the three ownership systems that the interviewees shared, along with their career experiences, it is appropriate to assert there is a relationship between the organizational context and one’s career identity.

Proposition 2 Managers in SOE system exhibit lower awareness of career identity than managers in other ownership systems.

Career aspiration. Existing literature on career aspiration has been largely centered on educational and vocational research (Nauta, Epperson, & Kahn, 1998; Nauta, & Epperson, 2003; Wang & Staver, 2001). Studies in organizational careers often use the term without an explicit definition, or they simply equate it to other related constructs, such as career orientation (e.g., Bigliardi, Petroni, & Dormio, 2005). The literature also shows a tendency for studies to define the concept differently based on a specific research purpose. For example, Rainey and DiAnne (1997) followed a definition of career aspiration specifically for females as “desire for advancement or a leadership role in one's chosen career” and treated it as an outcome variable in a study involving early adolescent girls (p. 161).

Accordingly, I define career aspiration in the current research as one’s desire for career success by exploring, repositioning, or advancing one’s career in the sense of career authenticity. I consider this definition is appropriate because it specifies the major
career drives of this particular population. Managerial career aspiration is different from other populations such as undergraduates or school-girls. A general desire for a “leadership role” may be appropriate for school students in their long-term development, but it may be simplistic for those in managerial positions where they are already in such roles. For example, Power’s aspiration came from his dream during his college years to become an entrepreneur. With the aspiration of a consulting career, Wen’s earlier transitions repositioned him each time in pursuit of a consulting career. These realistic and specific aspirations motivated them and became the drive in pursuing their VCTs. On the other hand, Mary never mentioned her career aspiration during the interview. Her VCT was pressed by the organizational environment and became a “choice” without knowing where her next step was.

In short, realistic and achievable career aspiration provides managers with intrinsic motivation for their subsequent transitions. It essentially serves as an affective compass, used by managers to steer their career opportunities. Career aspiration addresses the important career questions of “where do I see my career in the next n years” and “what is driving my career pursuits?” Thus, the following propositions are in order.

**Proposition 3. Career aspiration affects the type of VCT one takes.**

*Proposition 3a. Managers with vague career aspirations are more likely to engage in a shaken-out transition (SOT).*

*Proposition 3b. Managers focusing on career explorations are more likely to engage in a try-out transition (TOT).*

*Proposition 3c. Managers focusing on career repositioning are more likely to engage in a launch-out transition (LOT).*

*Proposition 3d. Managers focusing on career advancement are more likely to engage in a climb-out transition (COT).*
**Sensitivity to person-environment match.** I conceptualize the perceived dissonance with the environment as sensitivity to the person-environment match. This dimension of career authenticity refers to the tolerance level one can endure with the perceptions and feelings regarding one’s interactions with the external career world and the organizational context. It represents the affective attributes resulting from an individual’s view regarding the fit between the person and his/her career environment. It is essentially dealing with the questions of “How do I like/dislike where I am, and should I tolerate it?” A person with high sensitivity would have a low tolerance to the person-environment mismatch, and vice versa. For example, a person with low tolerance who perceives stronger dissonance with the environment may consider a career transition sooner than one with high tolerance or low sensitivity. The managers’ experiences offered a ground for this property. Mary caught the first available career opportunity and made a quick decision for a VCT as she had a low tolerance to her pre-transition environment. Conversely, experiencing a similar dissonance with his career environment, Harry took over a year for career planning when considering new opportunities. One’s perceived (mis)match and related sensitivity determine the timing, pace, and urgency of a subsequent VCT.

*Proposition 4. Sensitivity to person-environment match is positively related to the intention of a VCT.*

*Proposition 5. Sensitivity to person-environment match affects the type of VCT one takes.*

*Proposition 5a. Managers with high sensitivity to person-environment match are more likely to engage in a shaken-out transition (SOT).*
Proposition 5b. Managers with medium high sensitivity to person-environment match are more likely to engage in a try-out transition (TOT).

Proposition 5c. Managers with medium low sensitivity to person-environment match are more likely to engage in a launch-out transition (LOT).

Proposition 5d. Managers with low sensitivity to person-environment match are more likely to engage in a climb-out transition (COT).

Undoubtedly, a perceived person-environment (mis)match is subjective-based and is related to one’s interactions with the career environment. Perceptions can be changed over time. One may perceive different levels of person-environment (mis)match at different times. It may in turn affect one’s tolerance of, or sensitivity to, the perceived (mis)match. The dimension of sensitivity to person-environment match has a natural linkage to the construct of embeddedness discussed earlier. While sensitivity to person-environment match is positively related to VCT intention, embeddedness may moderate the relationship in a given organizational context. The data showed that an embedded manager, either with an ongoing project (e.g., Harry), or with the work environment (e.g., Ling), may ease the intention or delay the decision making for VCTs. Another example is related to the context of ownership systems. In the current skyrocketing Chinese housing market, if a manager receives an almost-free housing allotment at a fraction of the market price from the employing SOE, the person’s embeddedness with the SOE would be strengthened regardless of a previously perceived mismatch. This will certainly moderate the intention for a VCT. Similar cases in SOEs are frequently observed in the literature and practice (Deng, Shen, & Wang, 2011; Wang, Wang, & Bramley, 2005).

Proposition 6: The positive relationship between sensitivity to person-environment match and the intention of a VCT is moderated by embeddedness.
A Theoretical Framework of Voluntary Career Transition

The above discussion has outlined the theoretical framework derived from this study. I highlight the relationships of career authenticity and the four types of VCT in Figure 5. Career authenticity is jointly shaped by one’s career identity, career aspiration, and sensitivity to person-environment match. Career identity is the cognitive foundation, career aspiration serves as an affective compass, whereas sensitivity to a person-environment match determines the pace, and urgency of a VCT. The relationship between sensitivity and intention of VCT is moderated by embeddedness. The combination of the three dimensions determines one’s degree of career authenticity.

Organizational ownership systems in which managers developed themselves influence their degree of career authenticity through the formation of career identity. Meanwhile, one’s embeddedness in the organizational environment moderates the positive relationship between sensitivity to person-environment match and the intention of taking a VCT. Figure 5 shows that career authenticity and its three dimensions
determine the VCT types one may take. Overall, different combinations of the three dimensions of career authenticity can predict which type of VCT a manager is likely to take.

Through the above discussions, I have presented a theory of VCT in the Chinese context to conceptualize and make sense of the managers’ career transition experiences through open coding, selective coding and theoretical coding. This theory, while grounded in the data, meets the criteria for a theoretical contribution (Whetten, 1989). In particular, I have explained “why” and “how” managers make career transitions in selective and theoretical coding. I organize the relationships among major constructs of career authenticity and the four types of VCT in Table 10.

Table 10

The Patterns of VCT and Career Authenticity Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Shaken-out Transition</th>
<th>The Try-out Transition</th>
<th>The Launch-out Transition</th>
<th>The Climb-out Transition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• High sensitivity to person-environment match;</td>
<td>• Medium-high sensitivity to person-environment match;</td>
<td>• Medium-low sensitive to person-environment match;</td>
<td>• Low sensitivity to person-environment match;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vague career identity</td>
<td>• In search of career identity;</td>
<td>• Clarifying career identity;</td>
<td>• Established career identity;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Weak career aspiration;</td>
<td>• Focus on career exploration;</td>
<td>• Focus on career reposition;</td>
<td>• Focus on career advancement;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Weak embeddedness;</td>
<td>• Strong embeddedness;</td>
<td>• Moderate embeddedness;</td>
<td>• Weak embeddedness;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The theoretical aspects summarized in Table 10, in conjunction with the propositions, can be used to explain the managers’ VCT experiences with regard to their respective degrees of career authenticity in relation to the VCT types. They should also be able to predict which specific type of transitions a manager is likely to take based on
the combined aspect of the three dimensions of one’s career authenticity. This may help organizations and individuals to develop strategies and facilitate managerial career development in the Chinese context.

In summary, this study answers the three research questions in the following ways. For research question one, “What are the major determinants of voluntary career transitions experienced by Chinese managers,” my open coding showed that the major determinants of VCT experienced by the Chinese managers were perceived dissonance with the environment and personal aspiration. Through selective coding, I further identified the patterns of VCTs. The key determinant of different types of VCTs was career authenticity with three dimensions, sensitivity to the person-environment match, career identity, and career aspirations. For the second research question, “What is the career transition process experienced by Chinese managers,” I have described a general VCT transition process based on the patterns of VCTs as described in Figure 3. The uniqueness and major variances between the different types of VCT during the VCT process has been highlighted by Table 9. For the third question, “What are the outcomes of such voluntary career transitions,” professional growths, advances in skills and competencies, as well as improved self-recognition were found to be the tangible outcomes. An important conceptual outcome is likely to be the individual’s improved degree of career authenticity.

Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Research

This study examines the phenomenon of managerial voluntary career transitions (VCTs) in the Chinese context with a grounded theory approach. It contributes to the
HRD and HRM literature and offers important implications for research and practice. In this section, I discuss the implications for research and practice, and I conclude the study with a discussion of research limitations and recommendations for future research.

Implications for Research

This study contributes to HRD and HRM research in the following areas. First, it extended the research by integrating the disparate literatures in voluntary career transitions (VCT) and voluntary turnovers (VTOs) and examined the phenomenon from a unique lens in the Chinese context. It is among the first to explicitly examine the VCT/VTO phenomenon and develop a context-sensitive theoretical explanation of the whole picture in order to understand the complex phenomenon in the Chinese context. It offers empirical evidence to the recent calls for context-sensitive theory development in the Chinese transitioning context (Tsui, 2006; Whetten, 2009).

Second, through a grounded theory approach, this study inductively derived a theory of voluntary career transition in the Chinese context. The contextualized typology of VCTs revealed different patterns of VCTs from affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. The concept of career authenticity, as the major theme grounded in the data, is not only critical to understanding the VCT phenomenon, but is also likely to predict managerial VCT patterns and processes in the Chinese context imbedded in the multiple organizational ownership systems. The study contributes, through a unique lens, to advancing the research and exploration of the VCT phenomenon, as well as addresses both organizations’ concern of managerial talent shortages and managers’ concerns about personal career development. Furthermore, this study finds that organizational context,
such as SOE system, plays a critical role in shaping managers’ career identity, revealing the importance of organizational context in determining managers’ career authenticity.

Third, this study adds a new piece to the puzzle of boundaryless career assertion in the Chinese context (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). On the surface, all VCTs experienced by the managers may appear that the managers are pursuing a boundaryless career. Yet, the in-depth analysis, and the resulting theoretical framework, reveal that not all managers’ VCTs are driven by a boundaryless desire, and the VCT experiences are determined by career authenticity and the different dimensions reflecting the dynamic interactions between the true career self and the career environment, either perceived or experienced. Therefore, the findings of the present study pose a challenge to research on the boundaryless career in the Chinese context. Particularly, when organizations still constitute the basic units of productive activities in all societies, boundaryless career may not be as dominant as asserted in related literature.

**Implications for HRD/HRM Practice**

The theory of VCT derived from the inductive grounded theory method has important implications for both organizations and individual managers in the Chinese context. First, the framework may help organizations to identify managers who are likely to be involved in different types of transitions described in this study so as to develop effective strategies for recruiting, retaining, and developing managerial talents. For example, the shaken-out and try-out managers often do not have a defined career goal in a transition and are more sensitive to the organizational career environments compared to the other two types. Also, they are hesitant during the subsequent VCTs. Thus, it is possible for organizations to proactively address their career concerns and offer
organizational support. Such strategies may include providing job rotation opportunities and creating an environment that avoids face-losing situations at all levels. Designing challenging and achievable career paths for these managers with exciting projects may also be practical strategies to retain the managers.

For the launch-out managers, organizations may consider providing necessary resources based on organizational needs and taking advantage of their career ambitions for improving organizational performance. For the climb-out managers, due to their determined career goals and well-prepared plans, organizations may simply consider allowing them to leave unless a common ground can be identified between the organization and the managers. However, it may still be possible for organizations to maintain a relationship with the climb-outs as customers, suppliers, or informants, because former employees may still be able to contribute to the organization by referring needed managerial talents and other resources to the organization.

Second, contrary to the existing literature, the findings reveal that few managers’ VCT are solely based on attractive external opportunities. Rather, managerial VCTs were more or less related to their dissatisfaction with the pre-transition organizations. This implies that the organizational efforts in improving managerial job satisfaction, including maintaining psychological contract, are important in helping managers develop their organizational careers for long-term success. Similarly, facilitating an environment that foster and encourage managers’ embeddedness in the organization is also critical in retaining managerial talents.

Third, the findings of the study may inform organizational training and development activities. For instance, the results show that the transitioning managers take
a long time to establish their work related values in relation to the organizational environment in their daily work. Thus, it is important for organizations to develop management development programs on organizational values and culture to help shape their managerial values and beliefs. Moreover, organizations may initiate training and development programs to help develop managers’ awareness of career authenticity and clarify their career goals for professional development related to organizational goals. Such activities may also be aligned to HRM strategies and policies to inject managers’ career goals with the organization’s long-term objectives.

Fourth, the types of VCTs identified in the study may be used to guide HRM & HRD professionals to identify and develop the right managerial talents for the organization in the recruitment and development process. For instance, identifying potential climb-out and launch-out managers based on the attributes described in the study, particularly their career goal orientations and their consistency with organizational objectives, is important to judge the perceived person-environment match by the managers for long term organizational success. On the other hand, it may be risky to hire shaken-out or trial-out managers as they tend to take new career opportunities as a temporary choice and are not prepared sufficiently for the new career role.

From an individual perspective, understanding one’s career authenticity may help managers in career development and related career pursuits through VCTs. According to the present study, managers with higher degree of career authenticity as represented by the three dimensions often have higher ability to gather and process career information, plan for their career future, and are better prepared to solve career problems proactively.
This may inform Chinese managers for reflecting on their past and present career environment and experiences and developing their authentic careers.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study represents an initial effort in theorizing the observed overwhelming managerial VCT phenomenon in the Chinese transitioning context through a grounded theory approach. While the theory was developed and described in a testable way, its testability requires additional research, particularly in the quantitative analytical arena. Career authenticity has shown to be an important indicator to explain and predict the patterns of VCTs grounded in the managers’ career transition experiences. Subsequent research may be focused on developing a quantitative instrument to validate and measure career authenticity and its constructs. Such research is likely to refine specific aspects of the theory and related relationships as described in the propositions.

Second, given the research design, the managers were interviewed in a relatively similar time frame. Thus, the data were a cross-sectional representation of the managers’ feelings and perceptions about their VCTs. As such, it is not clear whether the identified patterns of VCTs represent different career development stages or a cyclical pattern of an individual manager in a VCT. This is another issue raised in the study warrants future research. Research following a longitudinal design to explore the career stages related to managerial VCTs is also needed. Such research may further identify the evolving nature of VCTs and improve our understanding of these phenomenal VCTs in the Chinese transitioning context.

Third, future studies may also consider extending the samples to managers located in other regions of China and to younger generations of Chinese managers with a similar
grounded theory or other qualitative approaches. This may confirm and refine the theoretical constructs of the theory and strengthening the generalizability of the theory.

Furthermore, as indicated by Glaser (1992) and demonstrated through this study, the grounded theory method is to produce a context-sensitive middle-range theory. Based on the above recommendations, future research may develop and validate the relationship between managerial career authenticity and the patterns of VCTs in other international settings. Efforts in this area are likely to develop a generalizable grand theory to explain and predict the general VCT behavior and process.

Limitations of the Study

While this grounded theory study offers new insights into the understanding and explanation of the complex phenomenon of voluntary career transitions in the Chinese context, it is not without limitations. First, as the data was mainly gathered through interviews, an interviewee needed to recall and express his/her career transition experiences. As a result, recall errors may be inevitable. Retrospection related errors are a recognized limitation of interview-based data collection (Golden, 1997). To minimize recall errors, I have focused on the participants’ most recent career transition experiences.

A second limitation is related to the fact that people tend to respond differently to the same experience at discrete times in their lives (Arthur, 1992). The responses of research participants toward their previous career experience might be influenced by contingencies. To overcome this limitation, I gathered rich data on the participants’ contingent situations through both interview questions and observations. I recorded them in field notes and used them as references to interpret the data.
A third limitation is relating to the observations. Data collected through observation is open to interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The objectiveness of the interpretation largely depends on the interviewer’s perceptions towards the participants and understanding of the participant’s situation, background, and characteristics (Merriam, 2001). Therefore, observations alone might not be reliable. However, through member validation, reflexivity, and triangulation, information captured through observations was constantly checked against information collected through interview conversations so that reliability and credibility were ensured (Patton, 2002).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a theory of VCT in the Chinese context through the selective coding and theoretical coding processes. Four types of VCT emerged from data that captured the major variance in affective, cognitive and behavioral process among the interviewee experienced VCTs. The concept of career authenticity and its three dimensions, career aspiration, career identity, and sensitivity to person-environment match were found to be the major constructs in explaining VCT and predicting particular VCT types. A set of propositions were induced to further capture the relationships among the constructs. With a discussion on the implications for research and practice, I concluded the study with recommendations for future research and research limitations.
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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

The University of Texas at Tyler
Institutional Review Board
October 9, 2008

Dear Ms. Sun:

Your request to conduct the study entitled: Career Transitions among Chinese Managers in Business and Industry, is approved as an expedited study, IRB #F2008-06 by The University of Texas at Tyler Institutional Review Board. This approval includes use of written informed consent. Please review the UT Tyler IRB Principal Investigator Responsibilities, and acknowledge your understanding of these responsibilities and the following through return of this email to the IRB Chair within one week after receipt of this approval letter:

- This approval is for one year, as of the date of the approval letter
- Request for Continuing Review must be completed for projects extending past one year
- Prompt reporting to the UT Tyler IRB of any proposed changes to this research activity
- Prompt reporting to the UT Tyler IRB and academic department administration will be done of any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others
- Suspension or termination of approval may be done if there is evidence of any serious or continuing noncompliance with Federal Regulations or any aberrations in original proposal.
- Any change in proposal procedures must be promptly reported to the IRB prior to implementing any changes except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.

Best of luck in your research, and do not hesitate to contact me if you need any further assistance.

Sincerely,

Gloria Duke, PhD, RN
Chair, UT Tyler IRB
中文采访提纲

1. 请你做一下简要的自我介绍。

2. 你在什么行业，什么性质的公司工作？你的职务和工作职责范围是什么？

3. 你最近一次是怎么换工作的？能否描述一下你工作转换的整个过程？
   - 你是什么时候开始考虑换工作的？为什么？
   - 你第一次是和谁谈起要换工作的？
   - 你怎么知道你已经下定决心要换工作了？
   - 你用了多久才下定决心换工作的？
   - 你换工作用了多长时间？

4. 有什么特殊的人或事件或某次谈话启发/影响你开始考虑转换工作吗？

5. 有什么特殊的人或事件或某次谈话影响了你的工作转换吗？

6. 你认为什么是你转换工作的主要原因呢？

7. 你以前的公司环境中有哪些特殊原因促使你转换工作呢？

8. 假如你现在还在原来的公司和原来的工作岗位，有什么变化可能会阻止你换工作呢？

9. 这次工作转换的后果是什么呢？对你意味着什么呢？

10. 你对这次工作转换的结果满意吗？为什么？
APPENDIX B.2
INTERVIEW GUIDE
(English Version)

1. Please briefly introduce yourself

2. What industry and what type of organization are you in? What is your position and responsibility in the organization?

3. How did you make your most recent career change? Could you describe the whole process of your most recent career transition in your own words?

   (Probing with the following questions as necessary)
   - When did you begin to think of a career change? Why?
   - Who was the first person you talked to about your change?
   - How did you know you had made the decision to change?
   - How long did it take you to make the decision for the career transition?
   - How long did it take you to make the actual transition?

4. What particular event(s), person(s), or conversation(s) triggered you for the career transition?

5. What particular event(s), person(s) or conversation(s) affected the career transition you had made?

6. What were the major factors that had influenced your decision-making of your career transition?

7. What were some specific factors from previous organizational environment do you think that had influenced your decision-making and transition process?

8. What could have kept you staying with the previous position instead of moving to the new position/company?
9. What was the result of this career transition? What does it mean to you?

10. Are you satisfied with the result? And why?
### OBSERVATIONAL PROTOCOL (Field notes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Topic: Voluntary Career Transition of Managers in China: A Grounded Theory Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting Observed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Observed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: From</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observer:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Descriptive Notes**  
(What occurred at the site chronologically the physically setting, a sketch of the site, portraits of individuals, activities, etc.) | **Reflective Notes**  
(Observer’s experiences, hunches, insights, feelings, themes, etc.) |
APPENDIX D
SAMPLE TRANSCRIPTS IN CHINESE

Interviewee: Manager 9
Interview Duration: 130 minutes

问: 你的英文名字是?
答: 是 Mary.

问: Mary 你到这家公司是什么时候呢?
答: 其实我到这家公司连 3 个月都不到，也就将将 3 个月的时间。
问: 那你原来是在什么地方呢?
答: 之前我是在创业，不知刘明有没有跟你说过？我的情况可能比其他的职业经理人更 复杂一些。

问: 你能大概我们先简单的说一下，大概你在这个一个职业转换的过程?
答: 我的第一份工作是当记者，在 XX 做记者，我是外交学院毕业的，外交学院是属于外做部的学校嘛，所以按说我应该理所当然的直接进入外交部，成为一个外交官，但是后来因为之前我也跟外交部的一些领导有一些关系，我也有 一些了解，我觉得外交部可能那个地方官僚气氛太浓，然后不喜欢我这样的 人去发展，我相对还是一个更喜欢有自己想法的这样一个人，然后呢所以就 决定说正好有一个机会可以去 XX 工作，我一直就很想当记者，我有我父亲曾经 做过记者，所以我对他那时

当记者时候的那种状态非常羡慕，我就想 OK 我是不会错过这个机会的。然 后我就去当记者，做了 3 年的记者，做 3 年的记者过程中，其实让我现在回头去看我会觉得，年轻人的第一份的职业选择我会非常鼓励他们如果可能的话去当记者，因为只有当记者这个行业你在中国你说是才有可能初出茅庐，像我那时也是个刚毕业的小孩吧，然后你有可能这么近距离的跟很多非常 high-level 和非常智慧的人去沟通，然后同时自己的层次也可以拔上来一个台阶。我是觉得当记者的这 3 年的时间里

开阔了我的视野，让我在那个有很大的变化，有我看问题的视角不会像以前那么 Narrow，反正相比其他的，不是记者比如我那些朋友们那些去了外交部的，我的同学们我感觉他们局限在某一个领域，但是我可能就更容易跳出 那个盒子看这个问题，这也为我未来的事业发展奠定了一定的基础，包括后 来蛮年轻的时候就做到一个 director 的位置也奠定了基础。但是在 XX 做了 3

年之后呢主要的困惑是来自于这里，就是说我父亲觉得做记者对于任何一个 人来说它不是可以做一生的职业，我们在行业里我们管记者有一个称呼叫跑 街记者，所谓跑街记者你不可能干一辈子嘛，你在体力上是有要求的，真的 要有体力你才能做好记者这份工作，你随时在捕捉新闻的那种焦虑感，所以 我是在 XX 后期的时候我就结婚了生孩子了，这个时候我觉得这份工作的那 种焦虑感不是我作为一个母亲所要有的那种状态。

问: 那个时候你多大呢?
答: 26-7 岁也就那样，我生孩子 26 岁不到，所以基本上是在 26 岁这样一个状态， 然后 那时刚好，因为在我在 XX 后期的时候我是跑 computer information industry 做 IT 的，然后就结识了很多这个领域的朋友，正好有一家公司叫 XYX
这家公司找 GR 的人，我一直以来，其实我在做记 者的时候，想会有很 多部门跟我们联系嘛，所以我对 GR 是很了解的，我是不想去做 PR，很多人问 我说很多当记者的人离开的时候都会选择做 PR 嘛，你为什么做 GR，好像是很 偏门的一个东西，因为都每次给他们回答我就说我很了解做 PR 的人他们在做 什么，但是我不知道做 G R的这帮是怎样的，其实我在中国我父亲后来他也在做 一些，虽然不是什么很高的职位，但是也是在政府里面做事，都是很 尊重在 政府里面做事的人的，所以我就想跟这些人打交道我会感觉蛮 comfortable 的， 我不介意去跟官员去打交道，好像好过去跟我自己这样的这类人打交道的。 所 以就决定就去接受这份 Offer，我就去了 XYX。我觉得我在 XYX 的这份工作也是 对我来说算是一次洗礼吧，因为毕竟 XYX 在中国规模不是很大，大概几千人左 右，但是毕竟是我第一跨上世界 500 强企业，它那种 工作的方法对我来说是 有很大的冲击，我觉得 XYX 之前的我是一个记者，然后到这的环境里 它是非常 x 的，然 后因为 XYX 相对来说节奏非常快，可能跟我以前当记者的那种节奏它不一样， 它不是那种焦虑感，是本身有很多工作要去做，然后你的 XXX 也会很大，那种 管理呀这种东西对我来说都是新的，所以我在 Sun 的早期头半年的里面基本上都 是在磨合阶段，磨合了以后我就开始喜欢，很喜欢我做的这份工作，后来呢做 了一段时间 GR，是这样其实我在 XYX 做了 4 年，好多人会问我，你要是在 XYX 之后的工作我还没有做到 4 年的，但却在 XYX 做了 4 年，如果你在 XYX 做过 你才知道，它是 4 大狼文化之一，按说是很难生存的，但是我在 XYX 的 4 年我 学到很多东西，而且赢得了人们对我工作的一个认可，我在那边早前加入的是一个 非常大的团队，当年我加入的时候是想在中国做一个非常 big plan,这个 plan 是 说要在中国拿下多少多少政府的单子，为中国的 government 是最大的 buyer 了对 IT 公司来说，但是很不幸它的这种 Model 没有运作成功，也逐步地他们也在研 究转变方向，他们也在讨论这个方法看怎么样能够改变，那逐步地其实我的那个 team 就逐步变成做 PR.
Appendix E

A SAMPLE OF ORGANIZED DATA ANALYSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data strips</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“…I believe that I won’t have problems renewing my contract with the current company after the three years…” (Rong 123)</td>
<td>Self-confidence in current job</td>
<td>Self-recognition</td>
<td>Intangible outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Although the brand name I am attached to was not as big as my previous employer, but I think I am better positioned for my future career because the space is much broader” (Tong, 084).</td>
<td>Career direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I realized investment bankers needed different perspectives to examine a company than those working in business operations” (Sheng, 072).</td>
<td>New professional insights</td>
<td>Professional growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“With this organization I began to work on new areas in investment, financing, budgeting, and forecasting. It was a great opportunity to practice what I had learned from my MBA program” (Yong, 058).</td>
<td>Learning to practicing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My experience with SOEs and POEs made me more adaptable to different types of organizations” (Ling, 156).</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A fast-growing entrepreneurial company brought me more challenges. Uncertainty and ongoing changes have been constant. That means working here is both challenging and rewarding. I needed to focus on specific aspects of the company. Applying my past approaches would not work here because of its constant change” (Tong, 039).</td>
<td>Taking challenges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>