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The mediating effect of protean career orientation on career adaptability and turnover intention: the view of Chinese millennial employees.

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Abstract

Rapid economic development has significantly impacted the job market and career attitudes of Chinese millennials, posing challenges to workplace sustainability and people management. This study seeks to investigate the perceptions of Chinese millennial workers regarding career success and mobility. Specifically, we examine the relationship between career adaptability and turnover intention and whether protean career orientation, internal career success, and employability, act as distal mediators in this relationship. We collected two-wave survey data from 715 employees working in the e-commerce and financial sectors of China. Although we are still in the process of testing and analysing our hypothesized model, this paper will provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex and dynamic careers of Chinese millennials. We aim to provide valuable insights for both theory and practice, extending protean career knowledge for talent management in China and beyond.

Keywords: Career adaptability, Career success, Employability, Millennials, Protean career orientation, Turnover intention

Introduction:

China's economic transformation over the past few decades has resulted in significant growth, industrialization, and advancements in technology and infrastructure (Morrison, 2019; Knight and Ding, 2012). As a result, China has become one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with a rising middle class and increased foreign investment. This rapid economic development has had a profound impact on the job market, workforce, and career attitudes of the younger generation of workers, commonly referred to as Chinese millennials (Wan and Cao, 2022; Zhao *et al.*, 2022). Chinese organisations face the challenge of retaining these valued millennial workers in a highly competitive job market, as the millennials prioritize career development and fulfilment.

We investigated the career attitudes of Chinese millennial employees in response to this challenge. Specifically, we examined the relationship between protean career orientation (PCO), career adaptability (CA) and internal career success (ICS), as well as PCO's mediating effect on intention-to-quit (ITQ). Although previous research has investigated the relationships among career adaptability, internal career success, and intention-to-quit, little is known about the possible mediating role of protean career orientation when analysing Chinese millennials' labour market behaviour.

Furthermore, as millennial employees have become a major part of the global workforce (Rigoni and Nelson, 2016), they have been increasingly theorised as a controversial generation of careerists, whose dynamic career views and demands have been criticized (Costanza *et al.*, 2012; Adkins, 2016). Countering this, the labour

market has become more heterogenized and less able to provide the relatively secure organisational careers of the past. It could be argued that protean career orientation is a rational survivalist response to this instability. Thus, we specifically focused on Chinese millennial employees whose career values are achievement-oriented and self-oriented (Fang *et al.*, 2019), using the concept of protean career orientation to understand understanding their career development.

The study aims to contribute to both the theoretical and practical understanding of career attitudes among Chinese millennial employees. By examining the mediating role of protean career orientation in the relationship between career adaptability, internal career success and intention-to-quit, as well as exploring the impact of employability on these variables, we provide a comprehensive understanding of how Chinese millennial employees view their careers and make decisions regarding their job prospects, and explore the role of protean career orientation across diverse antecedents and outcomes.

To better understand how Chinese millennial workers perceive their career success and consider prospective career moves, two research questions are posed: (1) Does protean career orientation mediate the relationship between career adaptability and internal career success? and (2) Does protean career orientation mediate the relationship between career adaptability and intention-to-quit?

Overall, we contribute to both theoretical and practical understanding of the complex and dynamic relationships among career adaptability, protean career orientation, internal career success, and intention-to-quit among Chinese millennial

employees, providing valuable insights for both academia and industry. This is important in extending protean career orientation knowledge and ensuring that it can be applied to workplaces around career management to provide sustainability and financial gains.

Literature review:

The turnover of Chinese millennials and protean career orientation

China's collectivist society has unique institutional characteristics and a state capitalist economic system that offer interesting insights into career development in various Chinese organisations. However, research on Chinese careers is underdeveloped (Yao *et al.*, 2020).

China's economic growth has positioned it as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, leading to increased foreign investment and a rising middle class (Morrison, 2019; Knight and Ding, 2012). The abolition of the "iron rice bowl" policy has changed the employer-employee relationship, resulting in higher rates of voluntary turnover among employees (Tsui *et al.*, 2006; Zhang and Morris, 2014), particularly Chinese millennials who prioritize career growth and personal satisfaction over job security (Ding *et al.*, 2000; Liu *et al.*, 2019). This has made it challenging for organisations to retain millennial employees who highly value career flexibility (Wan and Cao, 2022; Zhao *et al.*, 2022).

The high turnover rate among millennials is a significant economic concern not only in China, with empirical data indicating that 21% of millennials are job hoppers, costing the US economy \$30.5 billion annually Gallup (2016). In a global millennial survey that included 500 Chinese millennials, approximately 24% of millennials planned to leave their current jobs within two years, with 32% indicating that they would quit their jobs without having another lined up (Deloitte, 2022). Given these trends, retaining millennial employees is a significant challenge that requires HR

managers to address the complexities of employee turnover and retention. (Lee *et al.*, 2018; Zacher and Froidevaux, 2021).

Contemporary careers are increasingly unpredictable and dynamic (Hall, 2002; Guan *et al.*, 2019; Haenggli and Hirschi, 2020) due to intensified competition in the labour market and fluid macro work environments. This has challenged the traditional career mode (Cappelli, 1999), and various theories have been proposed, including protean (Hall, 1996; Baruch and Sullivan, 2022) and boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001; Sullivan and Arthur, 2006; Arthur, 2014).

The emergence of millennials in the global workforce has generated debate concerning their career perspectives. (Costanza *et al.*, 2012; Adkins, 2016; Rigoni and Nelson, 2016). Simultaneously, the labour market has become more diverse, thus reducing its ability to offer stable organisational careers as it did previously. Consequently, adopting a PCO could be considered a logical survival strategy for managing this volatility.

Protean career orientation refers to an individual's flexible and self-directed approach to career development, which presents challenges for organisations aiming to retain their highly valued employees (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2015). Working on the assumption that Chinese millennials hold achievement-oriented and self-oriented career values, the concept of protean career orientation is utilised here to better understand their career development (Fang *et al.*, 2019).

The distal mediation between career adaptability and intention-to-quit

CA is a crucial concept in career construction theory. It refers to an individual's

ability to cope with current and future career challenges, transitions, and traumas (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). This ability is characterized by self-regulatory strengths and the capacity to deal with changing work situations, particularly in unfamiliar and turbulent circumstances (Savickas, 2002). Career adaptability is made up of four personal attributes: career concern, control, curiosity, and confidence, which facilitate planning, decision-making, exploration, and problem-solving in relation to one's career (Bocciardi *et al.*, 2017).

According to Hall *et al.* (2018), there are three protean career processes that can lead to various vocational outcomes: identity awareness, adaptability, and agency. Previous research has established a positive relationship between protean career orientation and career adaptability (Chan *et al.*, 2016; Stauffer *et al.*, 2019; Chui *et al.*, 2022). Practitioners with protean career orientation are thought to be able to develop career adaptability as a career-related competency (Direnzo *et al.*, 2015), and individuals with high protean career orientation tend to have a strong sense of control that fosters the development of career adaptability (Li *et al.*, 2019). Although protean career orientation and career adaptability are closely related, they should be distinguished, as argued by Hirschi *et al.* (2016).

Previous research has often treated protean career orientation as an antecedent or moderator, but the role of protean career orientation as a possible mediator in the relationship between career adaptability and intention-to-quit has not been fully explored, which is an important gap in the literature, and the current study seeks to demonstrate the different functions of protean career orientation in influencing career

outcomes such as employability, internal career success, and intention-to-quit, with career adaptability as the antecedent. Given that career orientations are often associated with intention-to-quit (Li *et al.*, 2022), we aim to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between protean career orientation, career adaptability, and intention-to-quit.

According to Lee *et al.* (2018), the cost of replacing employees who leave an organisation can be substantial and may have a negative impact on organisational performance. When employees leave, they can take valuable knowledge and skills with them, leading to a decrease in organisational productivity. Additionally, the departure of one employee can create a ripple effect and influence others to leave, resulting in a turnover spiral. Therefore, the measurement of intention-to-quit is crucial in understanding career moves, which can help organisations develop policies to retain talent. Intention-to-quit refers to an employee's inclination to leave, and by assessing its level, organisations can predict actual turnover (Tett and Meyer, 1993). Lowering turnover rates can lead to increased productivity, quality, profit, and competitive advantage, as demonstrated by Redondo *et al.* (2021).

Research indicates that employees with higher levels of career adaptability are less likely to quit their jobs due to greater career satisfaction (Chan *et al.*, 2016). This is because career adaptability can enhance professional competence and facilitate proactive coping with complex circumstances, leading to successful occupational choices and a satisfying work life (Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas, 2011). Therefore, investigating the relationship between career adaptability and intention-to-quit can

help individuals navigate their career paths and reduce thoughts of leaving (Chan *et al.*, 2016). For organisations, the findings may be instrumental in managing careers to reduce undesired turnover.

Conversely, some scholars suggest that career adaptability is a double-edged sword that can enhance affective commitment but also increase intention-to-quit, directly and indirectly through its associations with dependence (Ito and Brotheridge, 2005, pp.14) High-involvement practices, such as encouraging autonomy, can satisfy employees' personal growth and build affective commitment but can also increase career adaptability and employability, leading to intention-to-quit (Zikic and Hall, 2009). Although some studies indicate that career adaptability triggers intention-to-quit and has no bearing on career satisfaction (*i.e.*, internal career success), this may be due to their limited focus on one dimension of career adaptability, for example, the research conducted by Klehe *et al.* (2011) and Karatepe and Olugbade (2017), which consists another gap in current literature.

It is essential to investigate the impact of career adaptability on internal career success and employability, as these are important factors for understanding millennials' decision-making processes regarding their personal career development (Van Laer *et al.*, 2021). Thus, to explore the relationship between career adaptability and intention-to-quit, and the potential mediation role of protean career orientation on this relationship, we will test the following hypotheses:

H1: The increased career adaptability will be negatively related to reduced intention-to-quit.

H2: The higher level of protean career orientation will be positively related to internal career success.

H3: The positive association between career adaptability and internal career success will be mediated by protean career orientation, in a sequence of CA-PCO-ICS.

Employability as a link between career adaptability and intention-to-quit

De Vos *et al.* (2017) propose a framework to explore the relationship between employability and two dimensions, namely internal and external employability. Internal employability is marked by employers' investment in enhancing their employees' skills, engagement, and expertise. This, in turn, leads to increased career opportunities, individual confidence, job security, career gains, and internal career success, as explained by Baranchenko *et al.* (2019) and De Cuyper and De Witte (2011).

Conversely, external employability is defined as an employee's commitment to lifetime employability rather than a lifetime career in a single organisation Emanuel Froehlich *et al.* (2014). Individuals with strong external employability are less dependent on organisations and believe that they can control their career development opportunities (De Vos *et al.*, 2017). These employees are motivated by their aspirations and seek maximum positive outcomes. De Cuyper and De Witte (2011) explain that employees with high external employability are confident in securing career development opportunities beyond their current work organisations. Therefore, we consider employability as a predictor of intention-to-quit, and how it mediates the relationship between career adaptability, protean career orientation and intention-to-

quit, which indicates the following hypotheses:

H4: The higher level of protean career orientation will be positively related to employability.

H5: The negative association between career adaptability and intention-to-quit will be mediated by protean career orientation and employability, in a sequence of CA-PCO-employability-ITQ.

H6: The negative association between career adaptability and intention-to-quit will be mediated by employability.

H7: The negative association between career adaptability and intention-to-quit will be mediated by protean career orientation, internal career success, and employability, in a sequence of CA-PCO-ICS-employability-ITQ.

Method and current progression:

Baruch and Sullivan (2022) recommended the use of longitudinal research to study within-person changes in protean career orientation, which entails tracking an individual's protean career orientation over time. In line with this recommendation, we administered two waves of surveys, separated by a six-month interval, in two major Chinese organisations from the e-commerce and financial sectors. The surveys encompassed items adopted from previously validated measures, and these were back-translated into Chinese to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness.

By measuring protean career orientation at two distinct points in time, we were able to capture within-person changes in this variable. The longitudinal data collected at the individual level allowed us to examine the trajectories of protean career orientation changes in the sampled population. This approach offered us the opportunity to not only understand the overall trends but also to observe the variability and individual differences in these trends.

Our model then applied this individual-level data to explore the relationships between changes in protean career orientation and other variables, namely internal career success, employability, and turnover intention. This dynamic and granular approach provided a more nuanced understanding of the role of protean career orientation in shaping career outcomes. By observing how shifts in protean career orientation influenced these outcomes over time, we were able to better understand the longitudinal effects and potential causal relationships.

In essence, the utilization of individual-level longitudinal data enabled us to address our hypotheses in a detailed and rigorous manner. It allowed us to delve into the complex dynamics of protean career orientation, shedding light on its evolving influence on career success, employability, and turnover intention. This approach, therefore, enriches our understanding of the intricate pathways of career development in the specific context of major Chinese organisations.

Data collection has been completed, 788 valid responses were obtained from individuals born between 1981-2000 in first wave (response rate 48%), and 715 valid responses in second wave (response rate 91%, low attrition rate). The proposed model is currently being analysed using SPSS version 28 and structural equation modelling (Amos version 29). Initial finding largely supports the anticipated hypothesised model and answer the proposed research questions. We anticipate more compelling outcomes for the full paper.

Here is the initial finding about variables' correlation:

Correlations					
	CA _{t1}	PCO _{t1}	PCO _{t2}	ICSt ₂	Et ₂
CA _{t1}					
PCO _{t1}	.59**				
PCO _{t2}	.42**	.33**			
ICSt ₂	.33**	.27**	.46**		
Et ₂	.44**	.29**	.44**	.42**	
ITQt ₂	0.07	0.03	0.06	0.05	.18**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Contribution:

This study offers significant contributions to both managerial practice and academic understanding. From a practical perspective, it addresses an urgent need for managers to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations of millennials, enabling them to refine their retention strategies accordingly. Our innovative methodology validates protean career measures in the context of millennials in China, a non-western, socialist, and collectivist country. China, with its unique aspects of state capitalism, provides interesting perspectives for examining career development variations across different types of organisations. This unique context allows for an intriguing exploration of diverse career development pathways.

Consequently, our research illuminates the motivations and protean career orientations of Chinese millennials, an area previously underexplored. With this knowledge, practitioners can tailor their strategies to align with the values and aspirations of millennials, potentially leading to increased employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention.

Theoretically, our research integrates protean career orientation as a mediating variable in organisational behaviour, deepening our understanding of the dynamic career paths of Chinese millennials. This addition enriches protean career theory and offers valuable insights for talent management, both within China and globally.

The validation of our protean career orientation mediation model provides a framework that could improve cooperation between individuals and organisational managers. Specifically, our findings can guide practitioners in retaining protean-oriented millennial employees, thereby contributing to more effective talent

management within China's unique socio-economic context and globally. This knowledge could allow organisations to leverage the benefits of a protean career orientation, such as increased adaptability and self-directedness, to cultivate a more engaged and resilient workforce. This substantial contribution thus encourages further exploration in the field of protean careers.

In summary, our findings not only enrich protean career theory but also provide key implications for talent management strategies. These insights can guide the retention of protean-oriented millennial employees, enhancing talent management within China's unique socio-economic context and globally. This significant contribution encourages further exploration in the field of protean careers. The relevance of protean career orientation for Chinese millennials is a further indication for increasing individualization of China and the changing nature of its labour market.

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Appendix 1. Measurement model:

