An example of a research project from start to finish

References in square brackets stand for chapter number, and project guide activity number. So, for example, [2.3] refers to Activity 3, *Making a Provenance Table*, in the project guide to Chapter 2.

Personalising the dissertation experience
(Chapter 1)

After she completed her first degree in Foreign Languages at Renmin University in Beijing, Zhai An-Ning worked for 18 months in the sales department of a branch of Anhui Double Crane Holdings, one of China's largest pharmaceutical companies. She decided that her future was as a personnel practitioner, however, and, with her parents' financial assistance, she took leave of absence from Anhui, and enrolled on an MSc in Human Resources programme at a UK university.

Shortly after her arrival at the university, An learnt that the department which taught the MSc held the status of a Centre of Excellence with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). She was delighted, since the relevance of the course to her personal career intentions seemed clear. This was confirmed for her when, having bought herself a Research Diary as the first step towards her final year dissertation [1.1], she obtained a copy of the dissertation guidelines document from her MSc course tutor [1.2], and examined the objectives for a dissertation listed there [1.3]. There was a particular emphasis on professional development, which, together with the acquisition of HR practitioner skills, was exactly what she was looking for [1.4].

Identifying a topic
(Chapter 2)

But what kind of topic would best achieve these personal aims? There were so many skills to acquire, so many distinct techniques in a variety of fields covered by her Masters programme, that at first, she worried that she could only express her topic as vaguely as 'something to do with HRM rather than HRD' preferring personnel administration, employee resourcing, and industrial relations to training and development. She went to the library and found a couple of dissertations done by Chinese students from previous years, but the topics were in the e-Business rather than the HR field; she discussed possibilities with three of her friends, brainstorming them under two headings: 'what topics have we enjoyed so far in the MSc course?' and 'what are we good at in the course?' [2.1]; [2.2]. She prepared an initial draft of a provenance table [2.3] for each of three ideas which occurred to her as a result:

- HR professionalisation and the impact of China's accession into the World Trade Organisation
- employee motivation
- employee selection techniques for sales staff in particular,

and showed them to one of her HR lecturers. He pointed out that the first possibility was very broad; and that the second, somewhat old-fashioned. Could she see herself doing something on organisational commitment instead of motivation as such? On reflection, An realised that she had found that part of her OB course particularly interesting, but she still wanted to do something with the idea of overseas influences on Chinese HR practice. She decided to concentrate further on these two issues, dropping the third possibility (employee selection techniques) when she realised, in doing the provenance table for that topic, that she would not be able to access and use the psychological selection tests she had initially thought of examining without substantial further training in their use.

She did some further work on a provenance table, with the following result.

Table 1 Zhai An-Ning's initial Provenance Table

Topic	A study of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in China		
Provenance	**Area**	**Field**	**Aspect / Cncepts / reading**
	Job satisfaction	employee motivation	Mullins, L.J. Management and Organisational Behaviour Prentice-Hall 2002. Vroom 'Work and Motivation' Proquest Information & Learning 1994.
		job satisfaction	Howarth, C. The Way people Work: Job satisfaction and the Challenge of Change Oxford Paperbacks 1984
	Organisational commitment	Theory	bin Sayeed, O. Organizational Commitment and Conflict Sage 2001. Mathieu J.E. & Zajac D.M. 'A review & meta-analysis of the antecedents, correlates & consequences of organizational commitment Psychological Bulletin 1990, 108, 2, 171-194.
		Measuring commitment	Morrow P.C. (ed.) The Theory & Measurement of Work Commitment JAI Monographs in OB & IR, 1993.
	The international dimension	Cultural differences in approaching motivation	Erez M. (ed.) Work Motivation in the Context of a Globalizing Economy Erlbaum 2001 Trompenaars L. & Hampden Turner C. Riding the Waves of Culture Nicholad Brealey 1997.
		World Trade Organisation	Nee, O.D. China and the WTO British Chamber of Commerce 2000. (http://www.coudert.com/ publications/?action=displayarticle&id=20)

An had captured the notion of job satisfaction, commitment, and the global dimension, but still felt unsure of what, particularly, she was going to do. The problem, you will recognise, was that her topic was still somewhat unfocused– why in particular was she working with this topic? What are her objectives, and her research question? She realised that she couldn't complete her initial Research Proposal [2.5] until she had resolved these issues. She decided to start some of the reading she had identified in the 'Aspect' column of her provenance table and take a week to see how her thoughts might gel.

Deciding on the type of project required
(chapter 3)

In the meanwhile, though, she was quite clear about one thing. She wanted to do an in-company focused project, using the resources already promised to her by her Sales Manager at Anhui Double Crane Holdings to collect survey-based data of some sort within her old employer company. She e-mailed him and confirmed that the support would still be available to her, as someone whose work the company valued and who would be returning to the company on completion of her MSc. [3.1] Moreover, the exchange of e-mails helped her to focus her topic in a fundamental way, when her manager asked her to consider whether the western approaches to organisational commitment might not be entirely suitable to a Chinese organisation. Should she perhaps not make a critical analysis of the whole concept a major part of her dissertation?

An felt that her literature review would, clearly, need to include this sort of analysis. But the exchange made her wonder whether existing approaches to employee commitment might in fact differ between western and Chinese firms. Specifically, would there be any differences, reflecting national culture within the respective organisational cultures, of western-owned pharmaceutical firms operating in China compared with indigenous firms? If she made this her research question, she would then be able to identify 'best practice' in both cases, and see what western ideas might be culturally compatible and hence open to adoption by the indigenously-owned firms. At this point, she felt a lot clearer about her rationale, and her research question [2.4]. She prepared a first draft of her Research Proposal [2.5], as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Zhai An-Ning's initial Research Proposal

Topic	A study of job satisfaction and organizational commitment among sales staff in indigenously- and foreign-owned pharmaceutical firms in China
Rationale	As a result of the relaxation of trade barriers consequent on WTO accession, and the low relative labour costs, China is likely to become one of the world's largest markets, during the next 30 years. This market represents an enormous opportunity for both domestic and foreign drug manufacturers. The Chinese market is focused on prescription drugs, which account for 85-90% of all drug sales in the country. Overall growth rates are forecast at 15% annually, powered by demand for better drugs and equipment for a home population of 1.3 billion people. Pharmaceutical sales representatives have a major responsibility for selling these prescription drugs, and their managers have an increasing concern for their training, development, and, especially, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. This dissertation will focus on satisfaction and commitment among two types of sales staff: those in foreign-owned firms, and those in indigenously-owned firms. It is important to establish whether the influences on satisfaction and commitment vary in the two types of organisation, with their different organizational cultures, before making recommendations for the indigenous firms.
Research Objective& Research Question	**Objectives** 1. To compare the level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction of sales staff in foreign-owned and indigenously owned Chinese pharmaceutical firms 2. To identify the factors that make for commitment in the two different types of organization, considering a range of demographic and organizational variables which may contribute differently to commitment in each. **Research Question** Does commitment work differently in the two types of organization?

Table 2 Zhai An-Ning's initial Research Proposal *contd*.

Provenance	Area	Field	Aspect / Cncepts / reading
	Job satisfaction	employee motivation	Mullins, L.J. Management and Organisational Behaviour Prentice-Hall 2002. Vroom 'Work and Motivation' Proquest Information & Learning 1994.
		in times of change	Howarth, C. The Way people Work: Job satisfaction and the Challenge of Change Oxford Paperbacks 1984. Ross C. & Reskin B. 'Education, control at work and job satisfaction' Social Science Research 1992, 21, 1, 134-148.
	Organisational commitment	Theory	bin Sayeed, O. Organizational Commitment and Conflict Sage 2001. Mathieu J.E. & Zajac D.M. 'A review & meta-analysis of the antecedents, correlates & consequences of organizational commitment Psychological Bulletin 1990, 108, 2, 171-194.
		Measuring commitment	Morrow P.C. (ed.) The Theory & Measurement of Work Commitment JAI Monographs in OB & IR, 1993.
	The international dimension	Cultural differences in approaching motivation	Erez M. (ed.) Work Motivation in the Context of a Globalizing Economy Erlbaum 2001 Trompenaars L. & Hampden Turner C. Riding the Waves of Culture Nicholad Brealey 1997.
		World Trade Organisation	Nee, O.D. China and the WTO British Chamber of Commerce 2000. (http://www.coudert.com/ publications/?action=displayarticle&id=20)

Writing her rationale and research objectives, An realised that her ontological position [5.1] was largely based on *beliefs, values and culture*; and involved a strong element of *comparison and benchmarking*; this helped her to clarify her research question [3.3]. She also took the opportunity to add some additional items to her provenance table. The Aspects list was originally based mostly on textbooks (and rather general ones at that!); her initial reading, even before it became systematic [7.2], had already begun to draw on journal articles in addition, which she added to the list.

Before she could think about the ethical issues [3.2], An needed to think through how feasible the research question might be [3.3]. It certainly offered great *generality*: if she got her research design right, her conclusions could be applied to both indigenously- and foreign-owned pharmaceutical firms in the Chinese market, The observations of cultural differences between them might have something to offer other kinds of indigenously- and foreign-owned firms as well, as would her conclusions on the nature of commitment in its Chinese cultural version. There were clear *applications*; and the topic was *well-balanced*, based as it was on a comparison: if she discovered no differences between the two types of organisation this result would be as interesting as if she did find differences. As regards the nature of her evidence, she was clear that she wanted to collect her own primary data, and had ascertained support would be forthcoming for this.

Getting organised and ensuring support
(Chapter 4; Chapter 6)
The structure of her dissertation was likely to be simple (as in Fig 3.1 in the main text) [3.5]. An started to make notes on her reading, sorting out her laptop and creating a separate set of files for her dissertation [4.3] checked the dissertation marking criteria in her research methods course handbook [3.6], and checked the submission dates [3.4] with her tutor. This led her to start thinking about her overall project timetable [4.1] which, inevitably, required her to begin thinking about her research methodology.

In the first case, she felt it was too early to do a Gantt chart [4.2], and decided on an outline table over the eight months she planned for her dissertation (see the bottom of Table 3). She didn't quite believe that she would need all of 3 months for her empirical work, but allowed herself that time in view of the comments made in Table 4.3 of the main text! A questionnaire was what she had decided on as her main technique. She had e-mailed her manager at Anhui, having glanced at exercises [6.3] and [6.4], to enquire about his continuing interest in the project. He said he was delighted to support a company-wide questionnaire if that was what she wanted to do, and could help her access other companies. Clearly, he valued An as a future employee when her studies were complete, and wished to encourage her, even though he would be losing her to the HR department!

Adopting a systematic approach to empirical work

(Chapter 8; Chapter 9)

An's tutor was concerned, feeling that she was rushing into her empirical work in a somewhat disorganised way. He pointed out that she really ought to think about the research design first. And was she to use the questionnaire as the main technique in a study which took a survey method approach, or might she perhaps use it, in a short form, as just one of the techniques of a comparative case study approach? Her research question could, after all, be addressed using either survey, or case study method. 'Get the approach, the design, and the method right before you start thinking about the details of the technique you will use' was his message.

An had always been comfortable with figures, and simple statistics. She realised from her reading that she would not need to adopt an exploratory design [8.2], since there was substantial consensus that job satisfaction and employee commitment depended on a number of easily specifiable variables such as age, gender, nature of employment (opportunity for worker participation), and performance management systems in place; and that there were some fairly obvious hypotheses which she could test. She found exercises [5.1] and [5.2] useful, but rather a formality, really. She knew already that a positivist approach would suit this topic. The research design was obvious: this would be a study with a causal design [8.2], in which she wished to test some hypotheses about the impact of these variables in each of two different kinds of organisation. She listed them as follows [9.1]:

- organisational commitment of sales representatives varies as a function of age, sex, educational level, and length of tenure within the organisation

- organisational commitment of sales representatives varies as a function of organisational practices (e.g. performance management systems, nature of employment) in western-owned as distinct from indigenous Chinese pharmaceutical firms

- there is a relationship between organisational commitment and job satisfaction of sales representatives.

Now, which method would she use to address these hypotheses [8.3]? Being comfortable with a positivist approach, An did not feel inclined to use any of the explicatory methods (although she was aware that this approach does not necessarily preclude the use of a quantitative techniques!). For her, the choice was between a case study and a survey. In the former case, she would need to choose one or two Chinese-owned pharmaceutical firms, and one or two with foreign ownership, and do a systematic comparison which included some in-depth interviews on cultural issues; in the latter, she would survey a representative sample of the top 500 pharmaceutical companies in China. She chose the latter approach because she felt it more appropriate to the sheer variety of pharmaceutical firms in China, and because her time was relatively limited. A wide-ranging survey, even though it did not go into the detail of day-to-day culture as experienced in these companies, would be more effective than a hurried attempt at an in-depth study. [8.3; 9.2]

As she considered the sampling issues [8.4], she realised that she had made a sensible decision. To do a comparative case study, replication logic [9.4] suggested that she would need to choose pharmaceutical firms which systematically represented different levels of the variables mentioned in her three hypotheses. This would require more than just the 'one or two' firms in each of the ownership categories, foreign and indigenous, to tease out the way in which the variables operated in each kind of firm [9.1]. She simply wouldn't have enough time for this. In contrast, in an approach based on survey method, a sample of 20 foreign-owned, and 20 indigenously-owned companies chosen from the most recent CPMD report (CPMD 2004) would be sufficient to give her the coverage she needed, assuming she were to prepare 30 questionnaires for each company. She would need to pay to access the CPMD report, but she could afford the fee of US$50 payable for a single look-up within this data-base.

So a survey was confirmed as the method to use [9.2] and, with 1200 respondents to be accessed (30 people in each of 20 foreign-owned and 20 indigenous firms), clearly, the technique had to be the postal questionnaire rather than a face-to-face interview. An briefly considered a website based, electronic questionnaire, but decided that her skills in web-site design were insufficient, with insufficient time available to develop them.

Time was becoming a major issue [8.1]. Here she was, in the second month of her timetable (see Table 3) and she still had her Research Proposal to finalise and the bulk of her detailed reading to do. Her tutor suggested that she might like to draft out the Introduction of her dissertation, so that he could give her some detailed feedback on that at about the same time as he provided feedback on her Proposal. Now that she was clear on her research approach, design, and method, with the details of the sampling addressed, An was able to prepare her Introduction immediately [7.1], but asked for a week's additional time for the preparation of the Proposal [5.3, 9.5] since she wanted to include some more references in the provenance table.

Doing some systematic reading
(Chapter 7)

An's first step was to prepare a relevance tree [7.2]. She realised early on that many of the issues she needed to cover under the heading of 'Organisational Commitment' were also relevant under the heading of 'Job Satisfaction', which led her to view the relationship between the two as important for her to clarify in her own mind, as a priority. Her first efforts should be to cover the relevant theory; the international and WTO dimension she decided to leave over for later in her reading; see Fig. 1.

She started her searches by using basic texts, and key authors such as Meyer & Allen (1991) in hard copy on her library shelves. Next, she followed the advice given in section 7.4 of the textbook, and began her internet searches by going though her library website gateway. Her first attempt using the 'Metafind' facility, which accesses all the gateways the library provides,

Figure 1 Zhai An-Ning's Relevance Tree
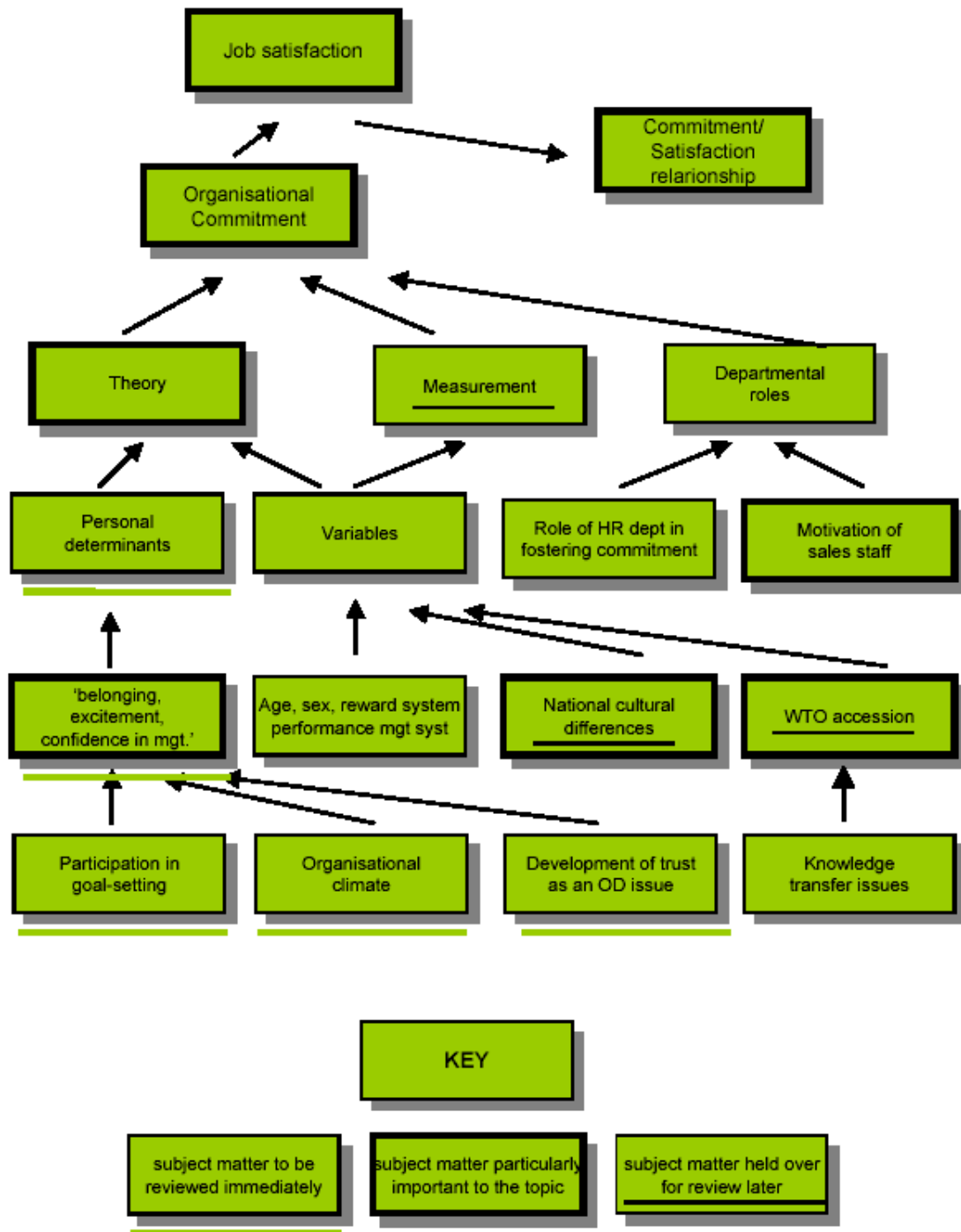
surprised her: there were over 54 million hits using the keyword 'commitment'! 'Organizational Commitment' was rather better, at 33 million hits, but still absurdly unmanageable… until she realised that 'all the gateways' of her particular library includes general search engines such as Altavista and Google! She restricted her search to cover the 12 Index and Abstract databases offered by her library, and found just over 6200 hits. Still too many for a systematic

search. Scanning the first few items, she noticed that some were offered by databases such as PubMed, and dealt with commitment of health service professionals: not likely to be very useful to her. Also, it occurred to her that her work on the relevance tree had identified the relationship between commitment and job satisfaction as particularly important. Searching a subset of databases excluding PubMed and Sportdiscus, and adding the words 'and job satisfaction' to her original 'organizational commitment' key word, resulted in a very manageable 80 hits of items that looked quite relevant. She decided to use this combinatorial approach– combining 'organizational commitment' or 'job satisfaction' with some of the other key terms in her relevance tree (e.g. 'measuring'; 'climate'; 'sales staff', while restricting the number of databases examined– as her main search strategy). [7.3]

Before she started putting together the notes from her reading into her literature review, she decided to see if there were any mailing lists of people interested in this research topic [7.5]. Searching the JISCMAIL service under 'commitment' found one mailing list, CREATIVE-MANAGEMENT, whose central objective was highly relevant, and she decided to subscribe to the list and lurk for awhile to see if this particular research community could provide a source of support for her own particular research interest.

An was now ready to finalise her Research Proposal, [9.5], expanding the provenance table to include more fields and authors that her early reading has suggested were relevant, revising her research design to provide detailed particulars of how she intended to measure the variable she was identifying as important as a result of this reading [9.1], fleshing out the details of her research method [9.2], techniques [9.3], and sampling [9.4].

Preparing and executing the empirical work
(Chapter 10; Chapter 11)

She reviewed her design and sampling, [10.1; 11.1], amending her plans for empirical work in one major respect. Her sampling plans aimed to reach 30 employees in each of 20 foreign-owned and 20 indigenous companies. If she issued the questionnaires directly to, and received directly from, 1200 respondents, she certainly could not afford the costs of postage involved. In preparing for her data-gathering [10.2], she realised that she would need to send out the questionnaires to a single person within each company for distribution to, and collection from, the 30 respondents. This way, the costs would be entirely feasible, being limited to 30 outward and 30 return mailings; and she had fairly good contacts within the pharmaceutical industry made through her previous employment, so she knew who to send the packages to. [11.2].

Table 3 : Zhai An-Ning's Eventual Research Proposal

Topic	A study of job satisfaction and organizational commitment among sales staff in indigenously- and foreign-owned pharmaceutical firms in China
Rationale	As a result of the relaxation of trade barriers consequent on WTO accession, and the low relative labour costs, China is likely to become one of the world's largest markets during the next 30 years. This market represents an enormous opportunity for both domestic and foreign drug manufacturers. The Chinese market is focused on prescription drugs, which account for 85-90% of all drug sales in the country. Overall growth rates are forecast at 15% annually, powered by demand for better drugs and equipment for a home population of 1.3 billion people. Pharmaceutical sales representatives have a major responsibility for selling these prescription drugs, and their managers have an increasing concern for their training, development, and, especially, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. This dissertation will focus on satisfaction and commitment among two types of sales staff: those in foreign-owned firms, and those in indigenously-owned firms. It is important to establish whether the influences on satisfaction and commitment vary in the two types of organisation, with their different organizational cultures, before making recommendations for the indigenous firms.
Research objective & research question	Objectives • To compare the level of organizational commitment and job satisfaction of sales staff in foreign-owned and indigenously owned Chinese pharmaceutical firms • To identify the factors that make for commitment in the two different types of organization, considering a range of demographic and organizational variables which may contribute differently to commitment in each. **Research Question** Does commitment work differently in the two types of organization?

Provenance	Area	Field	Aspect / Cncepts / reading
	Job satisfaction	employee motivation	Lincoln, J.R. 'Motivation in Chinese enterprises' in Steers, R.M. & Porter, L.W. (eds.) Motivation and Work Behavior London: McGraw Hill 1991. Mullins, L.J. Management and Organisational Behaviour Prentice-Hall 2002. Vroom 'Work and Motivation' Proquest Information & Learning 1994.
		in times of change	Howarth, C. The Way people Work: Job satisfaction and the Challenge of Change Oxford Paperbacks 1984. Ross C. & Reskin B. 'Education, control at work and job satisfaction' Social Science Research 1992, 21, 1, 134-148.

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Organisational commitment	Theory	bin Sayeed, O. Organizational Commitment and Conflict Sage 2001. Mathieu J.E. & Zajac D.M. 'A review & meta-analysis of the antecedents, correlates & consequences of organizational commitment Psychological Bulletin 1990, 108, 2, 171-194. Meyer J.P. & Allen N.J. 'A three-component conceptualization of organizational commitment' Human Resource Management 1991, 1, 61-89. Morrow P.C. 'Concept redundancy in organizational research: the case of work commitment' Academy of Management Review 1983, 8, 3, 486-500.
	Measuring commitment	Morrow P.C. (ed.) The Theory & Measurement of Work Commitment JAI Monographs in OB & IR, 1993. Benkhoff, B. 'Disentangling organizational commitment: the dangers of the OCQ for research and policy' Personnel Review 1997, 26, 1/2, 114-131.
Personal & situational variables	Sex	Clarke A. 'Job satisfaction and gender: why arw women so happy at work?' Labour Economics 1995, 4, 2, 341-372. Sloane P.J. & Williams H. 'Job satisfaction, comparison earnings, and gender' Labour; Review of Labour Economics & Industrial Relations 2000, 14, 3, 473-503.
	Age	Oswald, A. & Warr, P. 'Is job satisfaction U-shaped with age?' Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology 1996, 69, 1, 57-82
	Occupation: sales staff	Brown S.P. & Peterson R.A.'Antecedents and consequences of salesperson job satisfaction' Journal of Marketing Research 1993, 30, 1, 63-78.

		Futrell, C.M. & Parasuraman, A.'The relationship of satisfaction and performance to salesforce turnover' Journal of Marketing 1984, 48, 4.
		Motowidlo S.J. 'Predicting sales turnover from pay satisfaction and expectation' Journal of Applied Psychology 1983, 68, 3, 484-489.
		Rylander D.H. 'Chnages in organizational commitment for sales force newcomers: an exploratory look at early employment influences' in Tate, U.S. (ed.) Advances in Marketing: Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Marketing Educators. Houston, TX: March, 2003.
	Occupation: marketing professionals	Hunt S.D., Chinko L.B. & Wood Van R. 'Organizational commitment and marketing' Journal of Marleting 1985, 49, 1, 112-126.
The international dimension	Cultural differences in approaching motivation	Erez M. (ed.) Work Motivation in the Context of a Globalizing Economy Erlbaum 2001.
		Mobley W.H. 'Cross-cultural motivation' in Steers, R.M. & Porter, L.W. (eds.) Motivation and Work Behavior London: McGraw Hill 1991.
		Trompenaars L. & Hampden Turner C. Riding the Waves of Culture Nicholas Brealey 1997.
	World Trade Organisation	Liu, G.S. China's WTO Accession and the Impact on its Large Manufacturing Enterprises. Singapoore, NJ: Singapore University Press, 2001.
		Nee, O.D. China and the WTO British Chamber of Commerce 2000. (http://www.coudert.com/ publications/ ?action=displayarticle&id=20)
		Luo, Lin. The Impact of WRO Entry on China's State-owned Small and Medium Sized Import and Export Companies and Recommended Strategies. Masters Dissertation submitted to University of Luton, 2002.

Research design
A simple causal design examining the factors which influence job satisfaction and commitment in two different organizational cultures: those companies with overseas funding or ownership, and indigenously-owned. There are 3 hypotheses:

- organisational commitment of sales representatives varies as a function of age, sex, educational level, and length of tenure within the organisation
- organisational commitment of sales representatives varies as a function of organisational practices (e.g. performance management systems, nature of employment) in western-owned as distinct from indigenous Chinese pharmaceutical firms
- there is a relationship between organisational commitment and job satisfaction of sales representatives.

Method
Survey method is the main method to be used. A pilot study will be undertaken to identify answer categories, followed by a questionnaire delivered to 15 foreign-owned and 15 indigenously-owned pharmaceutical companies. This method is chosen on grounds of cost and convenience in accessing a variety of different types of pharamaceutical companies. This method can lead to somewhat low return rates; to maximize returns, the researcher will deliver the batches of questionnaires postally, to people known to her through her contacts within the industry.

Sampling
Companies will be chosen from the China Pharmaceutical Market Data (CPMD) data-base to represent a variety of company sizes as measured by annual revenue in dollars, drawing at random within each size range, for each of two forms of ownership, overseas and local. The company sample will thus be stratified by size and form of ownership. Within each company the questionnaires will be distributed to 20 sales staff, chosen at random.

Techniques
3 semi-structured interviews will be carried out with sales staff in one medium-sized foreign-owned, and one indigenous, pharmaceutical company, in order to finalise the issues to be covered and to obtain guidance on the answer categories to be used in the main study.
A total of 600 structured questionnaires (15 x 15 x 20) will be distributed through, and returned by, a representative of each of the companies (normally someone in the HR department. The main body of the questionnaire will consist of c. 5 questions covering personal information (age, sex, education level, tenure and the like); 10 to 15 statements designed to measure the organizational commitment of the respondent (some of these being drawn from the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire); followed by 15 statements intended to assess job satisfaction.

Timetable

April:	Finalise topic with tutor, start lit review
May:	Continue reading using web-based searches, write Introduction, finalise plans for empirical work, arrange visit to China
June:	Begin writing literature review, meet again with tutor, conduct 1 interview with western representatives of one foreign-owned and one indigenously-owned company, here in London; start preparation of questionnaires; leave for Beijing
July:	Complete pilot interviews; prepare and test questionnaires; issue questionnaires; continue reading.
August:	Complete writeup of literature review; start writeup of methodology and of pilot work; begin questionnaire analoysis.
September:	Return to UK; complete analysis, begin writeup of results
October:	Complete results section, begin discussion & conclusions section
November:	Finish dissertation and hand in.

Dissertation structure

Introduction: Objectives, rationale and industry background, short section on methodology.

Literature review: Organisational commitment job satisfaction and motivation; overview of Chinese pharmaceutical industry; globalization and the impact of the WTO; the issue of national and organizational cultural differences; satisfaction and commitment among sales staff in the two cultures; all taken together, making the rationale for the empirical work to be done.

Methodology: Research design, hypotheses, method, techniques and their rationale; sampling; issues fo validity and reliability; plans for empirical work and how they eventuated.

Results: of pilot study; of main study; the hypotheses tested and the results summarized.

Discussion and recommendations: implications of the findings for indigenously-owned Chinese pharmaceutical and, if possible, broader range of Chinese-owned companies. Implications for sales force training.

Conclusions; Bibliography.

But thinking this through, and completing the outline timetable in her Research Proposal, she realised that her sample was too ambitious in a different respect. She simply would not have the time available for the analysis of 1200 questionnaires [11.1]. Accessing a certain variety of companies was important to her, and so she reduced the number of firms just slightly, to 15 foreign-owned and 15 indigenous companies; but she also made savings in the number of sales staff addressed by her sample, reducing this from 30 per company to 20 per company. This gave her a rather more manageable sample of 600, from which she could reasonably expect between 150 and 350 returns: just about feasible with her own resources.

The final version of her Research Proposal is shown in Table 3: a useful blueprint with which to guide her detailed empirical work.

An began her interviews, roughing out her methodology section and ensuring that she had prepared an interview guide for the semi-structured questions she was going to ask in her pilot interviews [10.3]. She used a tape-recorder since the number of interviews at this stage (in London) was manageably small. She then completed the remainder of the pilot interviews in Beijing, and finalised the structure of her questionnaire. She had intended to ask some general questions, devised by herself and based on her reading, to assess organisational commitment but, now that she had done substantial reading, she realised that she could incorporate questions from the Organisational Commitment Questionnaire as a subset of the questions in her questionnaire. A quick content analysis of her pilot study data also enabled her to prepare standard answer categories for the multiple-choice and free choice questions, each with additional room for respondents to answer in their own words, of her main questionnaire.

While she was going through these pilot results, she remembered that one of her interviewees had pointed out, gently but firmly, that she really oughtn't to be asking her main sample respondents about their exact salaries, and about their state of health. This made An realise that she hadn't yet thought through the ethical issues involved in her empirical work–something she really must do before finalising and issuing the questionnaire.

Her university did not have an ethics declaration as part of its student dissertation administrative procedures, and she had forgotten to think about these issues so far. Running though the ethical guidelines in the text-book [3.2], she realised that she could use broad salary bands when asking about earnings, and explain that the planned question on health was there as a stress indicator, preceding the questionnaire with a statement of the confidentiality arrangements. All that seemed fine. The difficulty was over anonymity [11.4]. She decided that she had no need to know the names of her respondents; but if the questionnaires were to be gathered together in the individual companies by her contact person for posting back to her, there was nothing to stop that person from looking at the questionnaires immediately after they had been collected. This was a major problem.

She discussed it with the manager in her old firm. She would send out the questionnaires in batches to her contacts in the firms as she had previously decided. But she changed her plans about asking these staff to collect the questionnaires on her behalf, to post

on to her. Instead, the instructions sent with each questionnaire asked respondents to post them back to An directly, thus preserving the anonymity of their answers. Her manager agreed to provide the equivalent of £200-worth of pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelopes for An to use. How valuable it is to keep contacts with sponsors in good repair! [6.4].

Four weeks after issuing her questionnaires, An was a little worried. She had got back questionnaires from 10 of the foreign-owned firms, but there were on average only 6 respondents in each batch; and she only had returns from 4 of the locally-owned firms, though here the returns were from an average of 10 people in each batch. 100 questionnaires from a sample of 600 was really rather a low return rate; and the different pattern of returns from both types of company made her worry about a systematic bias in the answers received. She telephoned the foreign-owned firms and spoke with her personal contacts there; and she asked her manager for his support in chasing some of the locally-owned firms. He helped her to arrange visits to the line managers of the HR department staff in the locally-owned companies, to explain the importance of the study and to promise copies of an executive summary of her findings. In this way, she increased the returns from the 10 foreign-owned companies who had already replied, and ensured that one more foreign-owned firm provided returns; six more locally-owned firms also provided returns. She ended up with a set of 110 questionnaires from foreign-owned firms and 100 from locally-owned firms. She checked the size of the companies which had made returns, and was relieved to see there was no bias arising due to company size; so she had a balanced set of questionnaires and an overall response rate of 35%. She was ready to being the analysis of her main results.

Writing up the dissertation

(Chapter 13)

An's careful planning is obvious from the last part of her Research Proposal. She mapped out a programme by which she would start writing drafts of the earlier sections of her dissertation in the early months of her project work, seeking feedback from her tutor; she had been careful to make photocopying and binding arrangements in good time [13.1]. The structure she had chosen [3.5, 13.2] was suitable, and she found it straightforward to write up her material according to the framework she had set out at the end of her Research Proposal. This previous work was just as well, since the questionnaire analysis had taken more time than she had intended!

Her tutor was happy to read drafts of the dissertation chapter by chapter sent to him by e-mail, writing comments on the draft and returning them, also by e-mail. He had two main points to make. Firstly, he felt that An's literature review, while a good review of the relevant work, was somewhat 'academic' and finished very abruptly. The reader turned the page to the empirical sections and really had no good idea of why the particular research questions which An was about to address were important or relevant. The tutor suggested that An go though her literature review, inserting a brief summary after each major section, using bulleted points to summarise the main points in their relevance to her own research objectives. At the very

end of the literature review, she should restate the main points, indicating the gaps in our knowledge needing addressing, and thereby showing how the empirically-obtained answers to her own research question would build on the material covered in the literature review. An did as he suggested and her whole dissertation was more coherent as a result: a seamless argument throughout.

Her tutor's second main comment was also concerned with coherence – but this time, coherence of expression rather than of argument. An's English was very good for someone who had learnt it as her second language, but not quite good enough to be consistently comprehensible throughout her dissertation. Could she edit it somehow , to make it more readable? An assured him that she would find a suitable helper…

This was the biggest favour she had ever asked of her boyfriend, who was very competent in English, and sufficiently in love to agree to proofread and edit the whole thing over the single weekend which remained before the deadline for binding and submission. And so this tale has a happy ending. An went on to get a B+ for her dissertation, and an overall Distinction for her MSc in HRM.

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