In Their Own Eyes and Voices: The Value of an Executive MBA Program According to Participants

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to more effectively understand the learning experiences of Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) students. We asked 330 EMBA students to draw a graphic representation of their life and reflect on their EMBA experiences. We then applied the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique to conduct in-depth interviews with 13 EMBA students. By analyzing the visual and narrative data, we documented that the students tended to enter EMBA programs during transitional periods when facing major personal, professional, and self-conceptual challenges. The four most valued outcomes of their EMBA experiences were an analytical framework, a well-connected network, a community to belong to, and a journey of self-discovery and renewal.

Keywords

reflexivity, executive education, visual analysis, China, career, perception

Introduction and Background

This article reports the learning experiences of Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) students in China. Using the visual expressions and

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narratives of the students as our data, we focused our analyses on two questions: (a) What challenges did EMBA students perceive to be the most critical in their work and life when entering the program? (b) What benefits obtained from their EMBA education did they value the most?

Exploring the perceptions and experiences of EMBA students in China is useful and essential for several reasons. Management education scholars have long advocated that MBA programs address the total learning needs of students as people rather than merely as business managers (Evans, Treviño, & Weaver, 2006; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Khurana & Spender, 2012; Pinard & Allio, 2005 Rousseau, 2012). Many scholars have advocated on assisting managers to develop critical competencies, including self-reflexivity and self-awareness (Burgoyne & Stuart, 1977; De Déa Reglio & Light, 2009; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008; Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). In addition, increasing demand has been placed on educational institutions for integrated learning experiences, such as introducing multiple perspectives to facilitate searching for personal meaning and self-identity (e.g., Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011). Such integration requires an in-depth and holistic understanding of the learning experiences of the students. In response, a few business schools have experimented with and invested in leadership development programs that explicitly require authenticity and character building (e.g., Colby et al., 2011; Erhard, Jensen, & Granger, 2010). Various innovative approaches to undergraduate business education and regular MBA programs have been discussed (e.g., Colby et al., 2011; Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011); however, few studies have examined the learning experiences of EMBA students.

On the basis of our own EMBA teaching experiences and adult development literature, we believe that the learning experiences of EMBA students may differ from those of undergraduates and regular MBA students. Participants in EMBA programs are those who have increasingly broad responsibilities and multiple roles both inside and outside the office. They are middle-aged people at a transitional stage who are likely experiencing major challenges in both their professional and personal lives. According to the relevant literature, the personal affairs of managers affect their careers and vice versa. Effective management requires executives to understand not only tasks and the task environment but also their own emotional, personal, and spiritual capabilities in the intertwined dimensions of occupational, family, and leisure spheres (Petriglieri et al., 2011; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1980). As Judge, Boudreau, and Bretz (1994) indicated, conflicts between work and family in the personal lives of executives are a major source of job stress, negatively influencing both life and job satisfaction. Van Velsor and Leslie

suggested that to prevent successful executives from derailing, they must be encouraged to "take an in-depth look at personal issues such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and the need for control" (1995, p. 70). Even executives who are capable of maintaining a balance between life and work may encounter the challenges of addressing the personal problems of their subordinates. Therefore, many executives struggle with identity destabilization and experience uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety (e.g., Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987). To cope with these personal challenges, executives often participate in EMBA programs to pursue personal agendas and develop or adjust desirable individual and social roles (e.g., Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007; Long, 2004; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

It follows that, to develop a curriculum that fosters transformational learning and meets various developmental needs, management educators must study EMBA students' work, life, and learning experiences together in a holistic fashion. Previous studies on student experiences have been conducted mainly from the perspectives of researchers and teachers rather than that of students; a few studies have examined the life context of management students, such as their age, gender, and personal experiences (e.g., Conklin, 2012; Justice & Dornan, 2001; Pittinsky & Welle, 2005). According to our review of relevant literature, few empirical studies have focused on the overall learning experiences of EMBA students.

Second, the learning experiences of EMBA students in emerging economies such as that of China must be studied. Previous studies have limited their scope to the learning experiences of MBA students in developed countries; insufficient research has been conducted in emerging economies. There are reasons to believe that the link between personal development and management competency is not universal but rather context specific. The institutional characteristics of transitional economies can influence the professional and personal developmental needs and learning experiences of managers. Over the past few decades, China has dramatically transformed socially and economically. Social and economic changes have transformed many traditional values and social norms in China. Chinese managers may experience conflicting duties and feel torn by competing interests (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Cappelli, 2003; Zhu & Warner, 2000). For example, according to Confucian principles, leaders should be moral examples for their followers and care more about the collective good than their own (Bass, 1985; Fu & Tsui, 2003; Fu, Tsui, Liu, & Li, 2010). However, Western management education scholars have typically emphasized personalizing management education, which seemingly conflicts the collectivistic social expectations of business leaders in China. Designing and developing curricula and extracurricular activities that integrate professional and personal development for

executives in China requires an in-depth and holistic understanding of student-perceived educational, occupational, and personal experiences. However, only a few empirical studies have examined EMBA programs in the Chinese context (e.g., A. Chen & Doherty, 2013).

A third reason for our research is the methodological limitations of previous studies. To the best of our knowledge, most studies in this area have relied on survey instruments or interviews. In this study, we used a different approach and collected the students' visual expressions and verbal narratives to explore conscious and subconscious motives and emotions that arise during their EMBA learning experience. Such a combined method is original in the field of management education studies.

Visual methods have increasingly been used in management research to determine ingrained constructs (Stiles, 2004), such as individual and organizational change (e.g., Ray & Smith, 2012; Vince & Broussine, 1996), emotion (e.g., Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006), and stereotypes and inequality (e.g., Duff, 2011). Visual data are particularly valuable when subjects are reluctant to provide, or unable to articulate, their responses to sensitive questions (Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Nossiter & Biberman, 1990). Recent studies have reviewed the trends, contexts, and challenges of applying visual methods to management research (e.g., Bell & Davison, 2013; Bell, Warren, & Schroeder, 2014; R. E. Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, & Leeuwen, 2013). However, the visual data method has seldom been used to explore subjective learning experiences in management education. In this study, we used both visual and verbal analyses to investigate EMBA learner experiences and provide new insights relevant to the literature on management education in China.

Research Method

Visual Methods, Life Mapping, and the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique

Visual data have numerous forms, including photos, paintings, freehand drawings, computer-generated images, videos, and so on. The data can be generated by a researcher, who then theorizes according to participant interpretation. Since the 1920s, psychologists have devised pictorial and graphic instruments used to reveal unconscious drives, emotions, and insights (e.g., Collier, 1967; Murray, 1938; Rorschach, 1921). More recently, Buchanan (2001) reported a study in which researchers took photos of patients moving through a hospital and then converted the photos into a slideshow, presenting it to various hospital units. From the photographs, people in the various units

were able to see the complexities of the medical service process from various vantage points, facilitating an in-depth understanding of it.

Alternatively, visual data can be generated by study participants. For example, Zuboff (1988) invited clerical workers to draw freehand pictures illustrating how they felt about their jobs before and after conversion to a new computer system; a sample drawing from the study depicted a worker with a corked mouth, blinders over the eyes, and chains binding the arms. Drawing enabled the workers to express feelings that were hard to articulate, such as a loss of personal freedom.

In the current study, we used life mapping and the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET) to generate visual data. Life mapping is a graphic representation of the milestones in a person's life. Study participants created various types of visual elements (e.g., symbols, colors, lines and shapes, photographs, drawings, paper cutouts, and images collected from the Internet); although they could borrow visual elements from secondhand sources, the overall design had to be original.

The ZMET involves semistructured, in-depth interviews and using images provided by participants (Coulter, Zaltman, & Coulter, 2001; Denzin, 1989; McCracken, 1990). Researchers work with participants, probing beneath the surface of the images to identify the unconscious feelings that accompany the thought process (Olson, Waltersdorff, Forr, & Zaltman, 2008). The ZMET has been applied in many consumer behavior studies since the early 1990s. For example, Coulter's (2006) ZMET study showed that consumer experiences of Broadway shows do not simply pertain to watching live performances but involve escaping the stress of daily life. Another ZMET study revealed that farmers choose crop seeds according to their psychological and emotional impressions of farming rather than the functional benefits of the seeds (Zaltman, 2003). Olson et al. (2008) thoroughly reviewed the ZMET method.

Study Participants

Our study included 330 EMBA students at a top-ranking international business school located in China. The average age of the participants at the time of admission was 40.5 years; 45% were aged between 35 and 39 years, and 30% were aged between 40 and 45 years. Of the participants, 65% worked at the top management level, and 25% were women. Approximately 27% of the participants were employed by state-owned or -controlled firms, with 14% being employed by Western multinationals, 47% by private firms, and 7% by governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations. To justify sample representation, we used *t* tests to assess the differences in student composition

Table 1. *t*-Test Results of Student Composition.

Characters	Study school[a]	Five major EMBA programs in China[a]		*p*
		M	*SD*	
Demography				
Average age, years	40.5	40.7	0.265	.321
Female, %	25[b]	23.8	5.57	.629
Corporate ownership, %				
Private owned	47	47.1	9.99	.971
State owned	27	25.0	7.33	.497
Multinational	14	12.0	5.20	.348
Public sector and NGO	7	8.9	1.96	.045*
Industry, %				
Manufacturing	23	21.6	8.24	.663
Finance and banking	12	16.3	6.59	.168
Information technology	12	10.3	2.22	.086
Real estate and construction	10	10.0	4.47	1.000

[a]In our study, *N* = 330. The data of both the study school and of other five schools are collected from the public reports that described the composition of students. Annual enrollment of Executive MBA students was about 720 students in the study school, and about 1,786 students in these five leading business schools combined. [b]It means the 25% students were female.
*p < .05.

between our sample and the students enrolled in five other leading business schools in China. Descriptive statistics of both our study school sample and of the other five schools are shown in Table 1. To summarize, we found no significant difference between the characteristics (e.g., age, gender, industry, and company ownership type) of the students in the study school and those students in the other five top-ranking business schools in China.

Data Collection

Life Mapping. We collected the data in two phases in 2009 and 2010. In the first phase, we asked 330 EMBA students to draw life maps and reflect on their EMBA program experiences. The participants used their life maps to reflect on three main topics: (a) the three most critical experiences in their lives, (b) lessons they had learned from these milestones, and (c) their perceptions of the EMBA experience. The participants completed their life maps prior to beginning classes. During their final module in the EMBA

program, they first shared their reflections regarding their life maps in small groups, and each group then elected one member to present his or her life story and EMBA experience to the entire cohort. To ensure data validity, we thoroughly clarified that this part of the assignment was not graded. In total, 55 participants from five graduating cohorts delivered in-class presentations, which were recorded and transcribed. The total length of the 55 transcripts was 84,515 words, averaging approximately 1,500 words per participant.

Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique Study. In the second phase of data collection, we conducted ZMET interviews with 13 EMBA students selected from a broad range of industries, positions, and personal backgrounds, and asked them to reflect on their EMBA program experiences. Generally, we followed the guidelines developed by Olson Zaltman Associates, which involve the following steps: (a) picture gathering and storytelling, (b) conveying missing situations and images, and (c) metaphor probing and expanding the picture frame. First, the 13 participants gathered pictures and participated in storytelling. The participants used images that most clearly represented their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding the EMBA program and what the EMBA experience meant to them (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). They were accorded a few days to collect photographs or pictures from sources such as magazines, the Internet, and other publications. We then interviewed the participants about their experiences, asking them to explain why they had selected the images and how the images exemplified their EMBA program experiences. Second, the participants conveyed missing situations and images. Because pertinent pictures may not have been obtainable within the period allotted, we also asked each participant to "describe any experience for which he or she was unable to find a picture and to describe a picture that would represent the issue" (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995, p. 41). Third, the participants probed their metaphors and expanded their picture frames. To determine their thoughts and feelings effectively, we asked the participants to widen the frame of a selected picture and describe what else might enter the picture. For instance, we inquired, "If you could add something negative or stressful about your experience to the picture or your story, what would we see or feel?" Interview sessions lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours and were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The number of pictures gathered by each participant varied; in total, 39 pictures, photos, and drawings were collected from the participants. The transcribed interviews comprised 60,103 words, averaging 4,316 words per participant.

Data Analysis

The first step in our analysis was open coding. The reported events, actions, and interpretations were compared and contrasted and then grouped into categories and subcategories with assigned conceptual labels (Goulding, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We first individually and then jointly reviewed the visual and verbal data. Visual data included the life maps and images obtained during the ZMET interviews, and verbal data comprised the transcriptions of the life map presentations and ZMET interviews. We developed an initial coding sheet that combined the open-coding results from both of us with several major conceptual categories and subcategories identified. The major categories included the executive career stages of the participants, their adult life stages, the critical challenges that they faced when they began participating in the EMBA program, program activities, and learning benefits that they deemed critical, feelings, and emotions that they experienced toward the program, reflections on their life, and directions and plans for the future. Subcategories, such as role transitions, work−life balance, job satisfaction, success, stress, burnout, career setbacks, the trauma of divorce and deaths of family members, toxic emotions at work, enhanced competencies, networking, and a sense of belonging, were also identified. Using these initial open-coding results, we trained two graduate research assistants to identify and record specific events, activities, benefits, reflections, emotions, and future plans.

The second step in the analysis was axial coding, a process that entails relating categories to their subcategories and testing the relationships against the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Through systematic analysis and constant data comparisons, axial coding is used to reduce the number of codes and collect them in a manner that shows the relationships among them. We reviewed the detailed coding results from the open-coding analysis, sorted the subcategories into categories, and discussed possible combinations. Conceptual categories that occurred infrequently were either omitted or combined with similar categories. After three rounds of grouping and regrouping, considering suggestions offered by an anonymous reviewer, we established seven categories: three categories of challenges that the participants perceived as most critical when they began participating in the program (emotional challenges of managerial work, personal challenges in private life, and struggles with self-concept) and four categories of program benefits perceived as the most valuable by the participants ("knowing," "networking," "belonging," and "becoming"). Additional category development and refinement occurred at this stage. For example, we concluded that the participants could be divided into one of three categories when they began participating in the EMBA program: "still struggling," "lost at the top," or "accidental learners."

The final stage of analysis involved selective coding, a process used to identify and develop a core category that merges elements to explain the investigated behavior (Goulding, 1999). Selective coding is used to describe the hypothetical relationships between categories and subcategories (Babchuk, 1997). To identify the core category, we ascertained and compared patterns among the participants, seeking similarities, contradictions, and underlying explanations (Eisenhardt, 1989). At this stage, we observed a metaphorical journey of self-renewal within the EMBA program experiences and identified three stages of the journey: self-examination, exploration, and emerging directions. Because some of the images we collected required further clarification, we conducted additional interviews during the coding process to test and validate the journey of self-renewal metaphor.

Challenges Perceived as the Most Critical by the EMBA Students

Emotional Challenges at Work

Through the coding analysis of the data, we observed that most of the EMBA participants regarded emotional challenges at work to be critical and reported experiencing a wide range of emotions at work, such as anxiety, stress, burnout, pain, depression, regret, unhappiness, confusion, worry, helplessness, hopelessness, boredom, emptiness, drifting, wandering, being lost, aimlessness, bitterness, feeling under constant pressure, being heartbroken, loneliness, frustration, being pulled in opposite directions, fear, humiliation, guilt, self-doubt, being a prisoner, being discriminated against, sadness, hate, hidden feelings, suffocation, and suspicion. The most pervasive emotions and feelings were frustration, loneliness, helplessness, and worry about uncertainties.

Figure 1 shows a composite of graphical representations of emotional challenges faced at work, as described by the participants.

Although business executives occupy powerful and highly visible positions envied by many, the drawing by Participant 1, a female student, illustrates (Figure 1A) that, in private, however, they often experience feelings of anxiety, stress, fear, fatigue, helplessness, loneliness, frustration, and burnout. Participant 2, a male student, depicted similar feelings by providing an image of Sisyphus (Figure 1B) eternally pushing a rock up a hill, representing an endless career contest; his relentless pursuit of outward success had become his chief source of internal unhappiness. Participant 3, an executive at a state-owned firm, described feelings of being trapped in office politics and presented a picture of himself with his head buried in his hands (Figure 1C). Some participants reported feeling emotional strain so intense that they
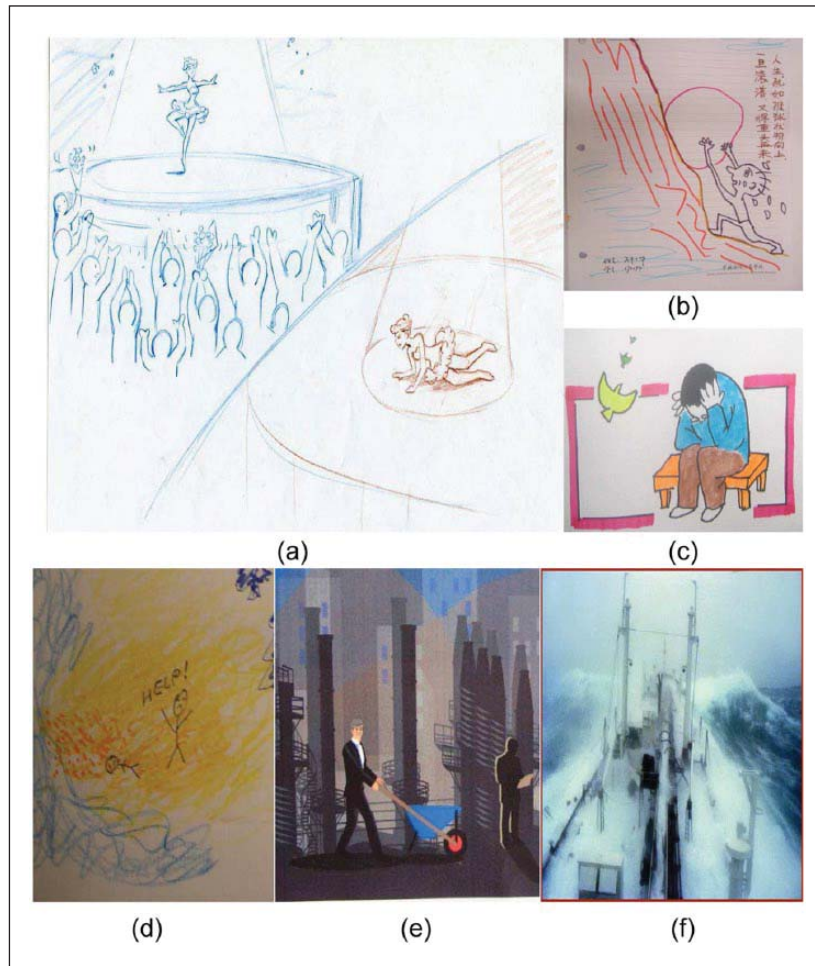
Figure 1. (A-F) Emotional challenges at work.

had to cry out for help, as depicted in the lower left corner of the image from Participant 4 (Figure 1D). Many of the participants expressed worries regarding future uncertainties and risks. Participant 5 said, "I feel anxious [about the business] because I feel like I'm probing around in the dark" (Figure 1E). Participant 6, who heads a fishery company, stated, "Our industry is extremely stormy. The risk of potential financial collapse and my responsibility to employees makes me feel like I am walking on eggshells" (Figure 1F).

Personal Challenges in Private Life

A second challenge that many of the participants indicated was personal problems in their private lives. In addition to demanding jobs and frequent business trips, they felt torn between the demands of their young children and the need to care for their elderly parents. They barely had any time for themselves or for integrating work and life. The constant pressure had a substantial negative effect on their physical and mental health.

An inability to care for elderly parents, spouses, and children was a common problem reported by the participants. Participant 7 drew an eighteenth-century-style stone house in a peaceful neighborhood (Figure 2A) to symbolize her dream of being able to spend quality time with her family. She described how she felt when she was unable to take care of her mother:

> My work is extremely demanding, which makes me exhausted. Earlier this year, my mother had a major operation and was hospitalised. However, I could not spare much time to accompany her. I felt helpless and in pain. I asked myself, "I have been working so hard for so many years, sacrificing personal and family time. But is this the type of life I want?"

Participant 8, who used to be a workaholic, painted a clock with 36 hours on one side of his life map (Figure 2B), symbolizing his desire for additional time to complete more work. His life was changed with the birth of his second child. Next to the clock (Figure 2C) was a fetus inside an eggshell. He was with his wife in the delivery room to videotape the birth of their second child. He recalled,

> Initially, it went well . . . but all of a sudden the baby's heartbeat could no longer be heard. What was originally expected to be a smooth, natural birth turned into a race for life. I heard the doctor yell for scissors, and then the most beautiful cry in my life. I will never forget the minute when the baby's heartbeat stopped; I learned so much in that one minute about time, family, and life.

In addition to family care, health problems were a commonly reported concern. For example, Participant 9 remembered the shock that he experienced when he was diagnosed with a cancer-like nodule in his lung. He despaired when he signed an authorization for exploratory open-chest surgery. On his life map, he drew himself falling from his high career position into a deep abyss; the EMBA learning experience enabled him to climb out of the abyss and continue with his career (Figure 2D).

Relationships with spouses and other family members were also frequently mentioned by the participants. For example, Participant 10 expressed
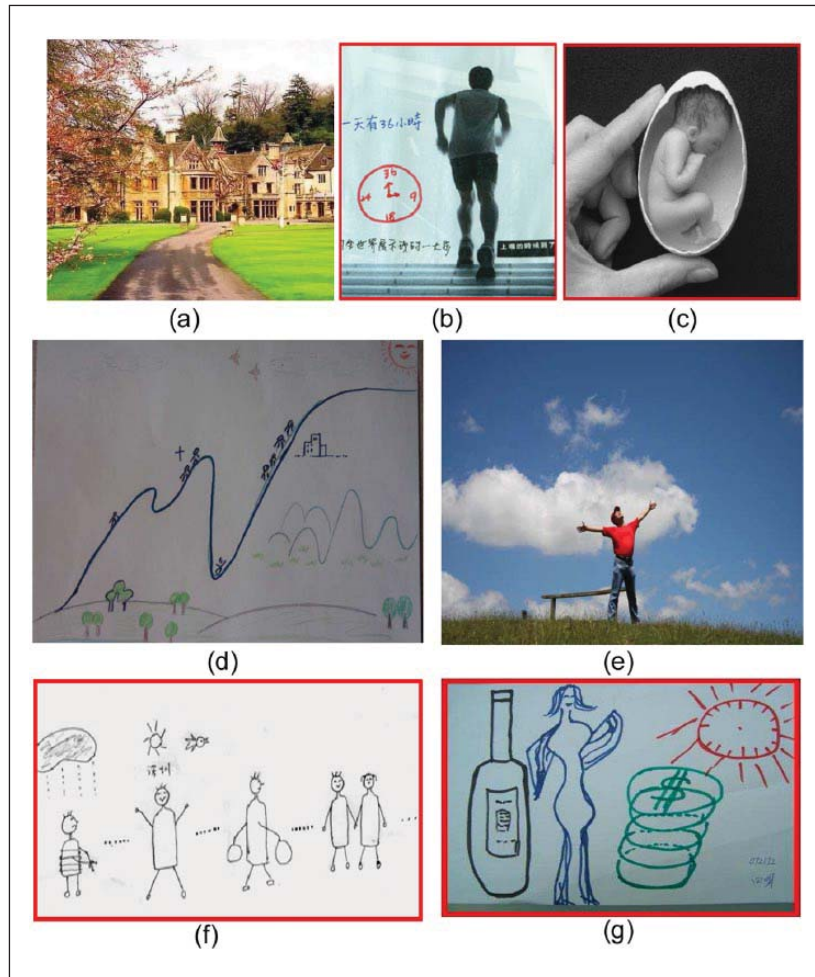
Figure 2. (A-E) Challenges in personal life.

the excruciating pain that he experienced during a 3-year divorce proceeding in which he lost the custody of his daughter. He now spends more time with his new family. Although his divorce was not depicted on his life map, his feelings of renewal afterward are evident in Figure 2E. He named his life map "relaunch" and summarized it by saying that "any problem that can be solved by money is simple; the personal challenges that cannot be solved by money are the difficult problems."

Participant 11 drew a series of self-portraits to illustrate how his restrictive and controlling parents affected his life and career. The boy (Figure 2F) on the far left, whose body and hands are tied with rope, symbolizes his childhood with overly protective parents. His ambition to succeed in a city far from home was driven largely by the desire to free himself from parental influence and is represented in the drawing by a bird flying out of a cage.

A great number of participants also shared the challenges of coping with success and temptation. For example, Participant 12, a male business leader who worked in the media and communication industry depicted managing temptations (Figure 2G), which he represented symbolically as money, wine, and women. He commented,

> It is a pleasure to enjoy fine wine, chase after pretty women, and indulge in beautiful scenery, but the problem we have to face is where and when to draw the line for ourselves. How much money is enough, for example? I drew five rings after the dollar sign. Should I draw more rings? Without proper boundaries, wine, beauty, and money can ruin you.

Struggle With Self-Concept

In addition to emotional challenges at work and personal challenges, the coding results revealed that the participants struggled to maintain a coherent and favorable self-concept.

Participant 13 depicted the identity struggle that she had been experiencing as a woman (Figure 3A). She elaborated on the three female images on her life map:

> The image on the left is me as a young girl, the one in the middle is me as a career woman, and the one on the right is my current self. As a young girl, life was simple and carefree. Since becoming a career woman, however, I have always been on duty, not just at work but also at home, because I have to take care of my parents, spouse, and children. The three hairstyles symbolise the different life stages of being a business woman. I often struggle at different stages, symbolised by the two different hairstyles worn by my current self: professional short hair on one side and girlish long hair on the other side. Changing hairstyles is easy, but juggling work, life, and personal and spiritual development needs is difficult.

Participant 14 expressed confusion about his personal identity. Regarding his life map (Figure 3B), he explained,

> Before joining the EMBA programme, I had been very lonely because it seemed to me that no one really understood me. It was like being a crane
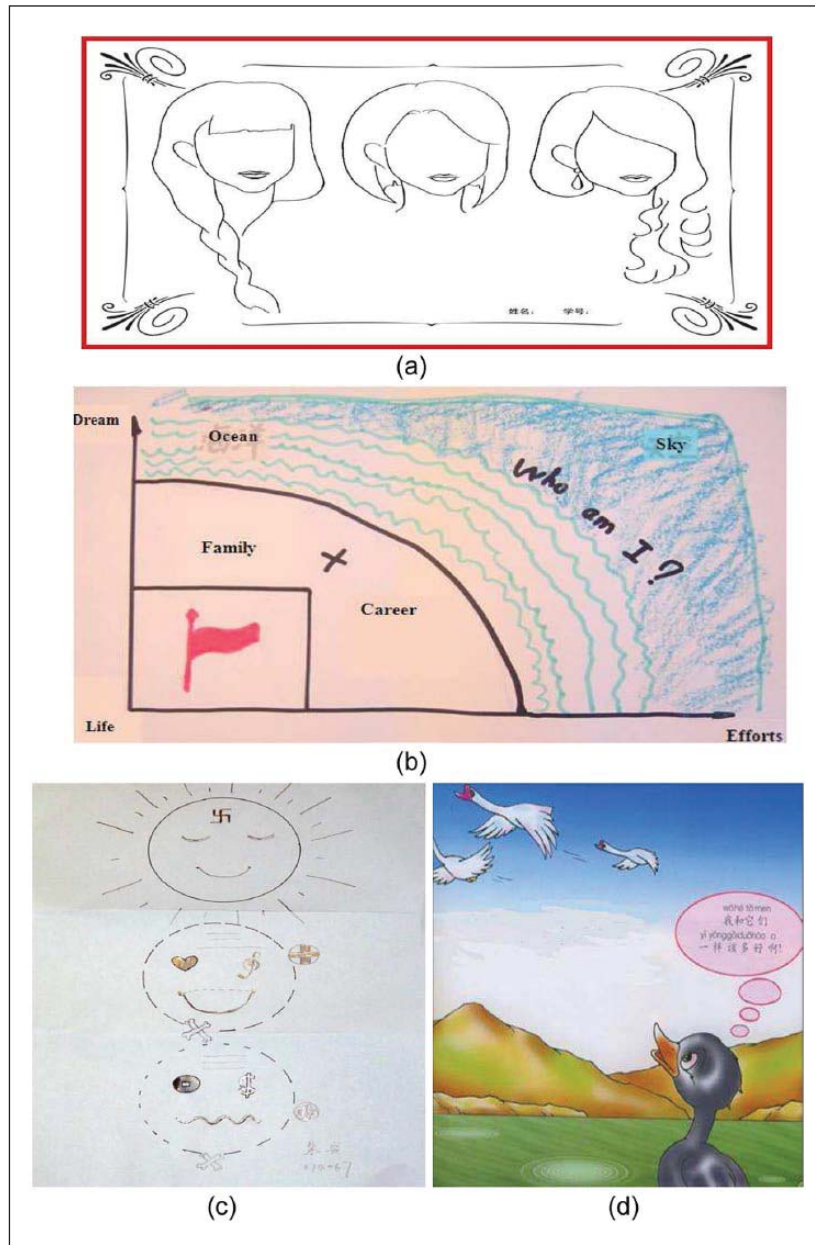
Figure 3. (A-D) Struggle in inner theatre.

amongst chickens, unable to be understood or to communicate. I often wondered whose fault it was—the crane's or the chickens'? Then I realised that it was the crane's fault for standing in the wrong place. After joining the EMBA programme, such pain gradually disappeared because I found an oasis with a lot of cranes. I have been able to behave naturally and simply be myself.

Some participants tried to further explore identity concerns by asking questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is true happiness?" For example, Participant 15 applied three sets of symbols to represent her understanding of happiness (Figure 3C). At the base level, happiness for her meant material wealth, symbolized by ancient coins and the U.S. dollar. At the second level, happiness was represented by humanistic needs, symbolized by a heart and a clef. Finally, at the third level, happiness was achieved in her spiritual world. The participant explained that time and energy spent at the first level would not bring enduring joy and that satisfying humanistic needs at the second level could enable longer lasting joy than could possessing material wealth. However, neither of the first two levels could dispel the suffering of mortality, such as illness (depicted by a cross), aging (represented by forehead wrinkles), and death (symbolized by a skull). She concluded that "it is only at the third level of spirituality (something we can believe in) that we can find lasting joy."

In general, we noticed that the EMBA participants, with an average age of 40 years, had a strong desire to actualize their ideal selves. Numerous life maps depicted similar themes. For example, Participant 16 illustrated an ugly duckling looking up at a swan and saying, "How I wish I could become one of them!" The duckling represents her actual self and the swan her ideal self (Figure 3D). Consistent with Van Maanen (1998), identity work takes place most intensely and consciously at specific junctures and transitions in a person's life. The preliminary results of our study revealed that the EMBA program may be a juncture at which students evaluate their lives to either consolidate an existing identity or acquire a new identity.

Who Experienced What: Still Struggling and Lost at the Top

Not every participant experienced the three common challenges in the same manner. As mentioned in the "Data Analysis" section, our analysis indicated that most participants could be categorized into three groups according to career stages: still struggling, lost at the top, and accidental learners. Participants belonging to the accidental-learners group were sent to the program by their employers, as a reward or benefit. In this section, we focus on the first two categories because only a few participants fell into the third category.

Still-struggling participants tended to be young and had successfully climbed the corporate ladder but had yet to achieve the corner-office or the C-suite level (or their companies were not yet well established). They simultaneously undertook the burdens of parenthood and of advancing their careers and often had to make major decisions while their experiences were still rather limited. These participants often described entering the program when their life were "full of choices as well as contradictions" and reported feeling "stressed out" and "overwhelmed."

Participant 17 depicted himself surrounded by question marks and faced with multiple divergent roads at the time at which he joined the EMBA program. Some of the roads were travelled frequently and covered with many footprints and others were uncharted; he stood before the roads, throwing both hands up to illustrate a sense of helplessness (Figure 4A). Participant 18, the owner of a start-up company, revealed his feeling of being overwhelmed by both work and the EMBA program:

> When I joined the programme, I was extremely busy; I felt that work and school were both overwhelming, but I could not tell anyone at home or in the office. I was so depressed that one day on my way to the office, I suddenly felt like I was about to die from fatigue, and I could not help bursting into tears and crying for a long time in my car. (Figure 4B)

Compared with the participants in the still-struggling category, those in the lost-at-the-top category were typically older and much more established in their careers. They had climbed to the apex of their organizations, accumulated a larger amount of wealth, become well-respected leaders in their professional circles, and had experienced a distinct set of challenges when they entered the EMBA program. Although they had accomplished more of their major life goals than had those in the still-struggling category, ironically, they felt a sense of emptiness and boredom.

Participant 19, the founder and CEO of his company, described the loneliness that came with unchallenged power and authority:

> In my company, I am surrounded by yes-men and yes-women; whatever I say goes. Few dare to challenge me because all of my decisions in the past 10 years have turned out to be right. In fact, the entire history of our company proves that I have been right because our business simply keeps growing, but I feel miserable because I seldom hear any dissenting voices, and there are not many people that I can really talk to. (Figure 4C)

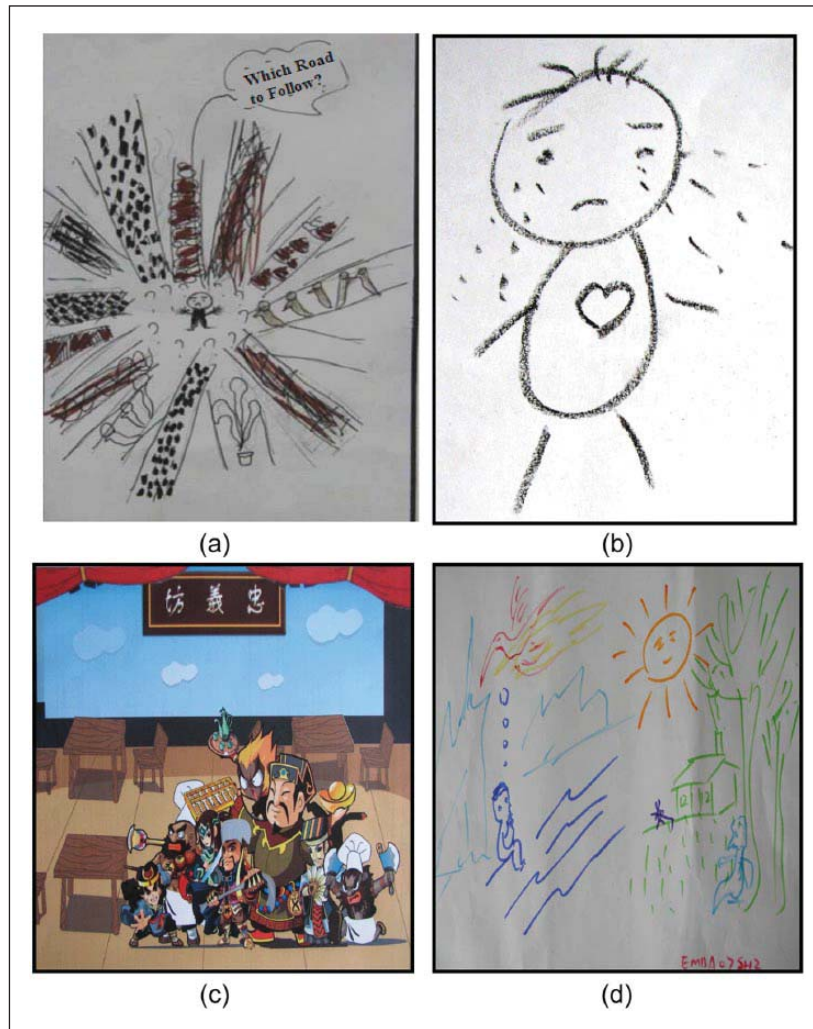Participant 20, a partner in a top law firm in Shanghai, described the boredom of being successful for too long:

Figure 4. (A-D) The "Still Struggling" and the "Lost at the Top."

> Being a partner in a law firm allows me to observe and experience a lot of interesting real-life stories. However, after so many years of practice, the job has become too routine and mechanical; there is no more fun in my work.

On his life map, a puzzled boy sits on the river bank, wondering what to do next (Figure 4D).

Executive MBA Program as a Journey of Self-Renewal

In the previous section, using data collected from EMBA student interviews and life maps, we reveal that the participants encountered three types of challenge, namely emotional challenges at work, personal challenges in private life, and identity challenges in the inner theatre. In the next section, we explore the value of the EMBA program as perceived by the participants.

The Learning Outcome Most Valued by Participants

Among the many benefits of the EMBA program mentioned by the participants, our coding analysis revealed four benefit categories: knowing, networking, belonging, and becoming. Belonging and becoming (that is, a sense of self-renewal) were the most valued by the participants, according to the frequency with which these two categories appeared in the coding results and the emphasis that the participants placed on them. Using a paragraph as the frequency unit, the cognitive benefit of knowing was mentioned in 42 of 157 transcribed paragraphs (27%); networking benefits appeared in 8% of the paragraphs, belonging appeared in 24% of the paragraphs, and self-renewal appeared in 40% of the paragraphs. Self-renewal was considered crucial to the participants, as illustrated by the following examples.

Participant 21 depicted his feeling of self-renewal by painting a lighthouse on his life map (Figure 5A). He explained,

> This picture depicts my life during my post college years. The dark lines symbolise the traces of my life. On the left-hand side is a desert, and the entangled lines illustrate my indecision, confusion, and frustration. The beacon symbolises the importance of my EMBA experience. It was a departure point for a new journey, where the future was bright and full of hope.

Participant 22 drew the yin–yang symbol on his life map, with the "body and soul" in the center (Figure 5B). He explained the meaning of the EMBA program as follows: "For me, the programme means change: change in myself and change in those around me. It has woken the dreams of my boyhood, which had been forgotten or neglected for years."

Participant 12, who emphasized the dangers of many temptations in life (Figure 2G), discussed how the EMBA experience enabled him to develop a new perspective. He stated,

> When I first came to the school, I had high expectations to learn some tricks and skills and make more money. But after 2 years in the programme, I am not
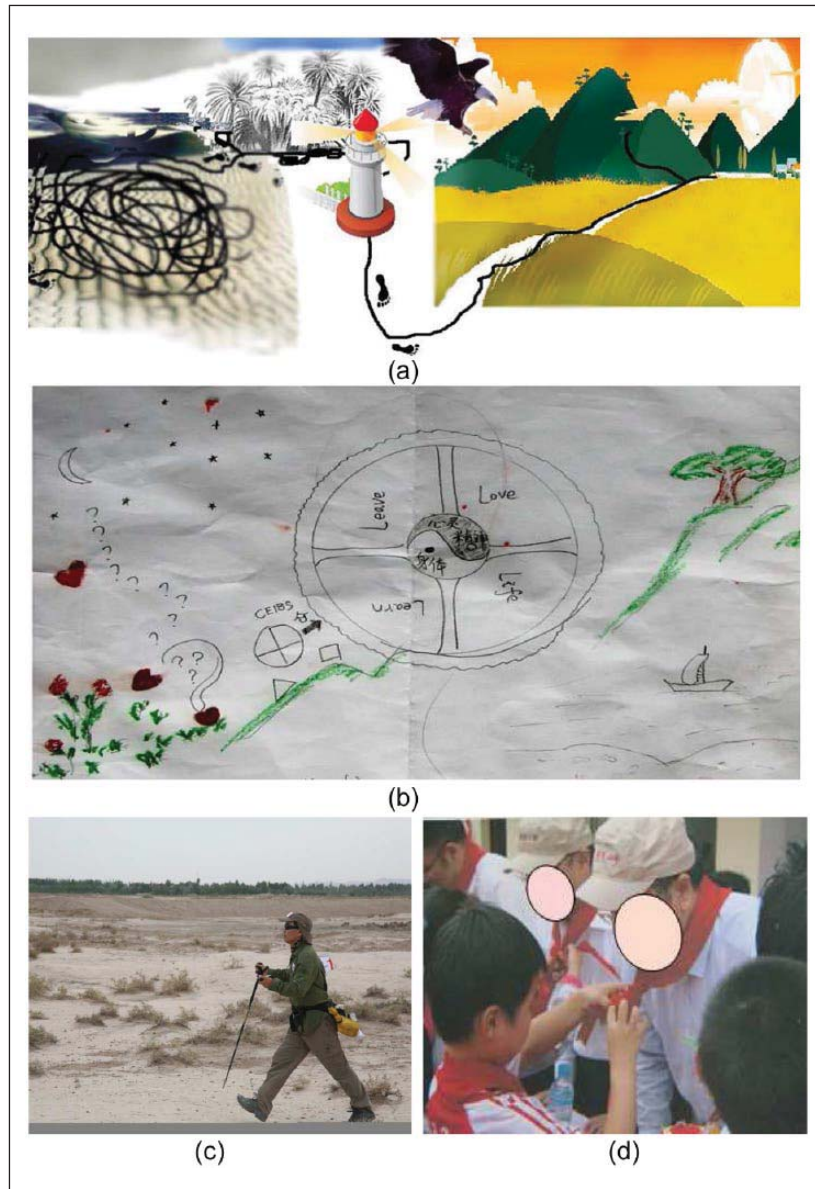
Figure 5. (A-D) Most valued outcome.

in a hurry to achieve that [goal] anymore. I came to learn business skills but ended up discovering more about philosophy of business and life. That is the biggest benefit that I have gained from the programme.

Three Stages on the Journey of Self-Renewal

Coding analysis indicated that the perceived journey of self-renewal typically had three stages. Interacting with faculty and students triggered critical self-examination in most participants on entering the program. Because of the psychologically safe environment with like-minded students and supportive faculty, participants opened up and discussed life challenges honestly with fellow students. Those who were still struggling vented frustrations and sought advice, and those lost at the top reexamined themselves, realizing that fellow students were either just as successful as themselves were or possessed a variety of strengths.

This led to the second stage, which involved a period of conscious exploration for a more desirable inner self. At this stage, the students participated in extracurricular activities that facilitated mutual understanding such as shadowing, in which they visited each other's company and followed each other for a few days at the office, providing feedback for each other. They also organized forums to share experiences and insights on topics of common interest. Some students participated in physically challenging activities to stretch their limits. For example, Participant 23 hiked in a 4-day competition in the desert during which he engaged in "soul searching" (Figure 5C). Participant 24 spearheaded class charity activities, raising money and supervising the construction of four elementary schools in underdeveloped regions. He reported having felt the most fulfilled when the children from the poor region presented him with a symbolic red scarf (Figure 5D). Similar feelings were commonly observed in both verbal and visual data.

Assisted and supported by classmates, the class coordinators, and faculty members, the students explored the meaning of existence and graduated with a sense of emergent direction and self-renewal in the third stage. Many participants indicated that the stage of renewal was the most crucial outcome achieved during their EMBA experience.

Participant 1, who depicted the fatigue and stress experienced by a celebrity dancer backstage on her life map (Figure 1A), used five pictures during the ZMET session to illustrate her journey of self-renewal in the EMBA program (Figure 6). Figure 6A described her initial emotional and psychological state at the beginning of the program:
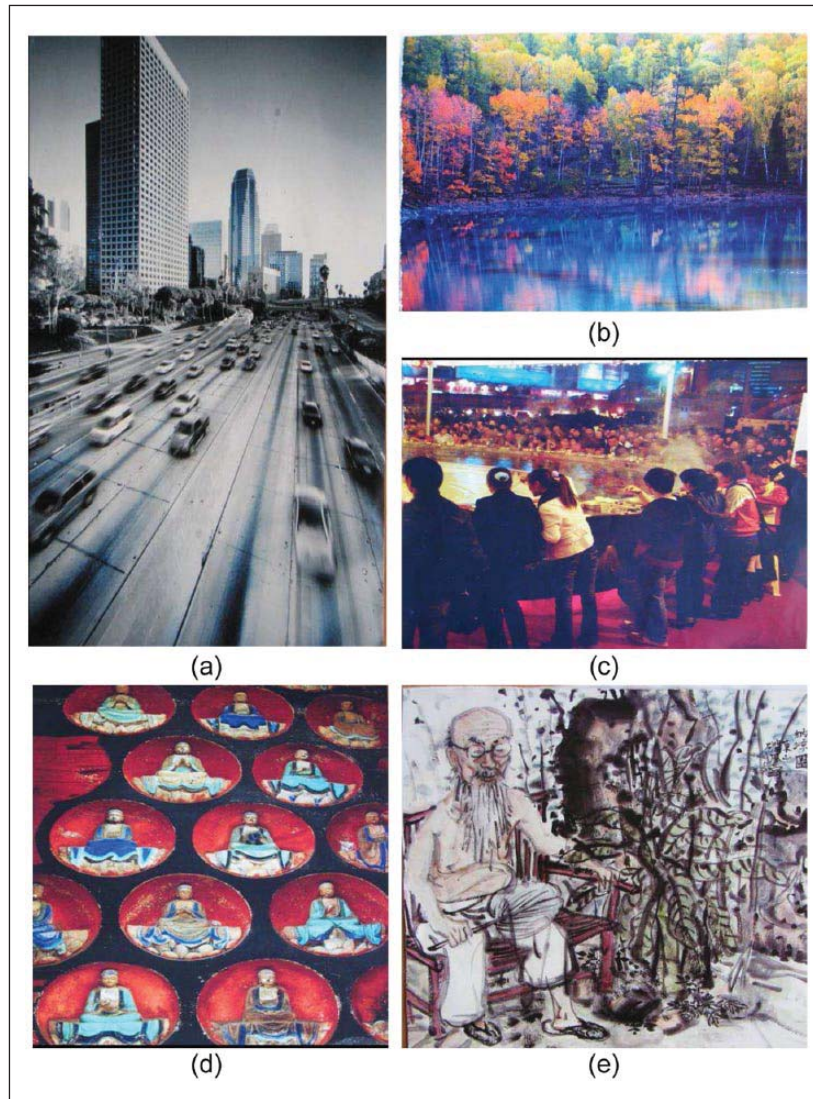
Figure 6. (A-E) Journey of self-renewal.

This was the situation when I started the programme: hectic days, ruthless competition, and ever-present pressure. I saw myself as a small car engulfed in a throng of traffic racing along the road. That was my world when I came here: competitive and stressful, and the colour tone was grey.

Figure 6B depicts the participant's feelings of elation at having landed in an otherworldly "Shangri-La" after initially encountering powerful management theories and analytical tools in the EMBA program. She explained, "This was the stage during which my learning came mostly from the faculty members. What the professors presented was fascinating and valuable. I learned so many new things that were really enlightening."

Figure 6C illustrates the participant's perceived experience in the next phase of the program, during which she learned not only from professors and classroom activities but also from observing and exchanging ideas with fellow students. At the center of Figure 6C is a large hotpot surrounded by hundreds of diners chaotically fighting over food, representing the period several months into the program, when the participants had established trust with one another and begun to talk candidly about sensitive topics related to "the dark side" of business. Her theoretical illusions were dispelled when she realized that classroom theories are often unfeasible in the real world. She commented, "Actually, it is rather painful to see the reality of doing business in China. The more I learn, the more I wonder if I can deal with all of these intertwined fights and contradictions."

Figure 6D depicts multiple images of the Buddha, reflecting another stage in the participant's learning journey. Conflicts between a theoretical wonderland and the seemingly chaotic real-world business environment prompted her to think critically about concerns such as human nature. This stage occurred later in the program, when the participants had spent approximately 1 year with their peers and had made several field trips in small groups and participated in various class activities. By building mutual trust and sharing common goals, many participants became friends or potential business partners, as Participant 1 summarized,

> The longer I spent with my peers in the programme, the more I was able to reflect on and understand myself. These images are apparently of the Buddha, but, from a different angle, I view them as the same crowd of people who were fighting for food at the hotpot in a previous picture (Figure 6C). I gradually learned to experience and interpret the surrounding world using my heart, not just my eyes. I could then understand that the chaos of people's seemingly abysmal behaviour actually has underlying logic. It was a transformational experience for me.

This participant's feelings regarding this process at graduation are depicted in Figure 6E:

> After I experienced the transition [and] developed personal connections with and trust in my classmates, I felt uplifted. I used to be a typical task-oriented

person, but now I am no longer driven solely by external standards. I feel more settled and peaceful and at ease dealing with whatever challenges come my way.

Although not every participant illustrated his or her experiences in the same manner as Participant 1, many experienced feelings of anxiety and stress at the beginning of the program, desired to explore a possible "new self" during the program, and felt a sense of self-renewal at the end.

Participant 14, who questioned the self in his life map (Figure 3B), described his journey as follows:

You can see the vast ocean. There are countless people in the world, and the majority of them are just drowning in a red sea and passing away without leaving a trace. I would like to find a blue ocean for myself. Can I find a sky that will reflect a blue colour on the ocean? Here [at the school] my classmates are so sincere and genuine that I feel I am walking into a blue ocean.

Participant 23, who participated in the desert hike (Figure 5C), elaborated on his EMBA experience:

The boost to my career has been only one aspect of my EMBA experience. More importantly, [the programme] has changed my sense of responsibility to family, friends, colleagues, and society in general. That is why I have participated in several charity events, including the 4-day soul-searching hiking competition in the desert. For me, a more positive outlook on life and a healthier body are my most crucial achievements in the EMBA [programme].

Discussion

Using visual and verbal data analyses, we explored the learning experiences of EMBA students. Although students in business schools are frequently stereotyped as self-centered, career-driven, or even heartless, people, our study presents an alternative view of their inner world. The EMBA students tended to enter the program during transitional periods in their lives, during which their personal and professional challenges were intrinsically entangled. The three challenges that they perceived as the most critical were toxic emotions at work, dilemmas in private life, and struggles with self-concept. The four benefits they valued most were an analytical framework, a well-connected network, a community to belong to, and a journey of self-discovery and renewal. For participants who were still struggling, the learning benefits of knowing and networking were critical, whereas for the lost-at-the-top participants, the sense of "learning as belonging and becoming" were much more

valuable. In the remainder of this section, we discuss our findings and their implications for management educators and administrators.

The first implication pertains to emotional challenges encountered by students. Because emotions permeate organizational life (Barsade & Gilson, 2007; Flam, 1990) and executives make complex and occasionally painful choices, managerial decisions at the executive level often prompt wide-spread toxic emotions within an organization (Frost, 2004). Theoretically, to develop emotionally healthy organizations, executives must become effective "emotion managers" (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002). In practice, however, the emotional dimension of behavior and the importance of managing emotions receive less attention during graduate education in general (Jaeger, 2003) and in MBA programs in particular (Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor, 2002).

This challenge is particularly critical in the context of China. Economic reform in the past 30 years has brought not only rapid economic growth but also profound social changes. Market liberalization and urbanization have not only increased personal freedom but also broken community connec-tions, diluted family ties, and fractured traditional social harmony. Such social change has resulted in widespread feelings of loneliness and isolation in China (Moskowitz, 2008). Moreover, the Chinese culture idealizes per-sonal sacrifice and stoic endurance and emphasizes indirectness as a means of maintaining social harmony (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Chinese executives who have grown up in such a high-context environment are often poorly prepared to recognize and manage emotional challenges in their work and life. Although most EMBA programs in China contain emotional intelligence or similar courses in the curriculum, the dominant focus is goal orientation and cost−benefit analysis. However, the findings of our study suggest that the challenges managers face in China are more emotional than cognitive; thus, management educators in China should place more focus on assisting manag-ers in developing emotional competency in addition to business and manage-ment competencies.

The emotional challenge also calls Chinese business school administra-tors to review their student admission criteria. Most EMBA admission pro-cesses include cognitive tests (e.g., GMAT), a review of career potential (e.g., curriculum vitae, essay, reference letter), and evaluations of commu-nication skills (e.g., admission interviews). Although these procedures are necessary, we recommend that business schools also adopt innovative tools and procedures for assessing applicants' levels of psychological strength and their personal maturity for coping with emotional challenges. Assessing and developing participant experience and willingness to conduct self-exploration and self-reflection is imperative. Applicants with strong

potential can contribute not only as successful business leaders but also as valuable peers who can share insights on emotional management that benefit classmates.

The second implication relates to challenges in the personal lives of students. Although balancing life and work is a challenge for busy executives in any country, tensions are particularly high in China. Three decades of double-digit GDP growth not only broadened career opportunities but also intensified work demands. Because of seemingly endless opportunities for both their companies and themselves, many Chinese executives worked long hours for decades and ignored warning signs in their personal lives until it was too late. That is probably why many of the life-shaping "milestones" reported by our study participants entailed traumatic events in their personal lives. Our study shows that similar to their Western counterparts, Chinese executives are highly ambitious and hardworking (Cox & Cooper, 1989; Schmidt, 1999). In addition, our study results are consistent with that of a longitudinal study by Kofodimos (1990), who reported that the problems of greatest concern to executives "often have to do with their personal lives—marriage, children, health, lifestyle, and values" (p. 58).

A difficult question is raised. Should business schools include assisting students with their personal problems as a learning goal? The conventional view is that what occurs in the office concerns the company, whereas what occurs outside the office is the responsibility of the employee (e.g., Friedman, Christensen, & DeGroot, 1998). Although the private nature of personal concerns creates awkwardness when they are addressed in a classroom setting, scholars such as Petriglieri et al. (2011) have offered useful suggestions. In an example they provided, a leading MBA program offered students counselling by professional psychologists in confidential sessions, reporting encouraging results. Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007) explored similar examples. Although similar practices have yet to be observed in emerging economies such as that of China, we hope that our findings stimulate needed innovation in this regard.

The third implication regards students' struggles in identity renewal. Although the consequence of identity exploration has long been acknowledged in organizational research, only over the past few years have scholars begun paying attention to its link to management learning (Bennis, 1989; Harmeling, 2011; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Petriglieri et al., 2011; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Two main insights from this literature are that the goal of learning is not so much to obtain knowledge and skills but rather to become a new person, with the learning constituting a part of the new self, and that a main role of a business school is to serve as an "identity workspace" for students.

Our findings show that "learning as becoming" and the business school as an "identity workspace" are especially meaningful for Chinese executives. The average age of the EMBA students in our sample was 40 years, the mid-point of their adult lives. According to adult development theory, middle age tends to prompt people to reappraise their identities (Levinson, 1986). As documented in this study, our participants experienced profound identity anxiety and began questioning who they were. Although identity exploration is an ongoing process, its undertaking is the most intense and conscious during transition periods and in rapidly changing social contexts (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Van Maanen, 1998). The EMBA students in our sample were born in the 1960s and 1970s, entered college, and began their careers in the 1980s and 1990s, a period when Chinese ideology and values underwent tremendous changes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Great Cultural Revolution turned traditional Chinese values upside down. The 1980s witnessed Deng Xiaoping's policies of encouraging individual achievement, economic efficiency, and entrepreneurship (Tian, 1998; Yao, 2000). China's admission into the World Trade Organization in 2001 led to a further spread of Western capitalistic ideologies that strongly influenced Chinese business practice and education systems (Vohra, 2000). The dramatic and sometimes turbulent economic, social, and political changes, together with the inevitable role conflicts in such a transitional period, had a profound impact on the values, beliefs, and identities of the current generation of Chinese executives and resulted in many psychological strains and a struggle for identity stabilization and renewal. That is probably why our study participants perceived "belonging" and "becoming" to be the most beneficial parts of their EMBA program experience.

Although we discuss the three critical challenges individually, we emphasize here that the functional, emotional, and existential aspects of management learning and education are intrinsically intertwined (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). The participants' verbal and visual expressions suggested that personal challenges in their private lives could result from identity struggles and that, in many instances, emotional challenges at work were a by-product of competing priorities between their personal and professional interests.

Because effective introspection and reflection require a substantial amount of self-disclosure of both the professional and personal lives of students, in which many concerns are sensitive and the disclosed information is potentially damaging, EMBA educators and administrators may have to develop effective techniques for building and enhancing trust and install policies that protect private information. A high level of trust is a must if executives are to open up and engage in genuine introspection and reflection. This is because executives are constantly scrutinized by both internal and external stakeholders and are

accustomed to displaying only organizationally required images in public. Enhancing trust and protecting private information is particularly important in a Chinese context because Chinese people are known to be less willing to engage in self-disclosure than Americans and people in Western culture in general (G.-M. Chen, 1995; Ow & Katz, 1999). Our findings also suggest that business schools should reexamine the recruitment criteria and performance evaluation practices for both faculty and supporting staff. In pursuing a top-tier international ranking, many leading EMBA programs in China select faculty members mostly on the basis of their research expertise, which is important but insufficient for facilitating holistic student learning and development. Our findings suggest that faculty members who have a holistic understanding of EMBA student work and life and who are willing and able to coach and mentor others may be more valuable to students' transformational experiences. Therefore, we recommend that business schools add these requirements to their recruitment and development criteria; among equally qualified candidates, people who meet these criteria should be granted priority.

Finally, our findings show that preparing business leaders in a rapidly changing environment requires an enriched, expanded, and integrated vision of learning and development. Such integration requires institutional intentionality and consorted efforts from business school administrators, faculty, staff, and students and from business practitioners. Offering a few isolated self-development or reflection courses is inadequate for providing integration; rather, schools must upgrade the curricula and seek to impart an innovative business education. Recent studies, such as that by Colby et al. (2011), have included dynamic examples and practices such as the Stern School series on professionalism, character, and thoughtfulness regarding places of business in a larger social context, the Wharton School series concentrating on social impact, and the Santa Clara University series connecting the liberal arts and scientific dimensions of professional fields. Although these approaches are used in undergraduate management programs, they provide inspiration for stakeholders in EMBA programs to create programs that benefit both students and societal development.

Such efforts are particularly crucial in the Chinese context. MBA programs and curricula were "imported" from Western countries to China in the early 1990s, and some "erroneous learning" has occurred in the process. As Liang and Lin (2008) documented, Chinese MBA programs have become overly rational, with the holistic view of individuals and organizations that was characteristic of Chinese culture being, to a large extent, lost. We suggest that business school leaders in China consider indigenous curriculum innovation to most effectively satisfy the needs of business leaders in China and Chinese companies expanding globally.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with most qualitative studies, interpretation of our findings is subject to the limitations of our own lenses. Similar to other methods, visual data analysis entails validity threats and potential sources of bias. Because people vary greatly in drawing aptitude (Robey, 1983), any visual technique carries the risk of overgeneralizing the responses of particularly artistic informants, just as verbal instruments tend to overgeneralize the responses of more articulate informants. Furthermore, because visual data analysis is interpretive, potential bias from both researchers and study subjects must be controlled for carefully. Thus, the most fundamental guarantor of valid visual data analysis is to not rely solely on visual methods but combine visual techniques with verbal methods (questionnaires and interviews; A. D. Meyer, 1991; Miller, 1982; Novak, 1976; Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). In this study, we integrated both visual and verbal data to explore conscious and subconscious motives and emotions pertaining to student subjective learning experiences. The theme, method, and the preliminary findings of our study may stimulate interest among other scholars and teachers to further explore the composition and roles of management education.

Authors' Note

The China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) does not have, other than promoting academic research, any commercial interested in the works presented in this work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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