

Making history with an MBA

China 2024 Measures the Progress of a New Generation

by Patricia Houlihan

Stacy Palestrant, '05, loves the chaotic pace of change in China. “When you’re in Beijing or Shanghai, you feel like you’re in the center of the world. There is so much excitement and energy in the air. Construction crews work 24/7 and people have a sense of optimism about their country’s future. Young professionals especially feel as if anything is possible.”

With the economy exploding and capitalism taking a firm hold in the world’s most populous country, China is poised for unprecedented change. But given its recent transition to a market economy, who will lead China’s economic growth in the 21st century?

Palestrant is directing a study that will follow the career paths and life experiences of 115 newly minted Chinese MBAs for 20 years. “This project allows us to follow the young business leaders who are transforming China,” she said. “Rather than doing a macro study looking at general

trends in the economy, we’re looking at individuals—at the choices they’ll make and the challenges they will confront. This study will be a close look at the first generation of professionally trained managers in China. We’ll gain an intimate, personal understanding of who they are and how they are changing China.”

The project, China 2024, is sponsored by Katzenbach Partners LLC, a consulting firm based in New York where Palestrant was employed before coming to the GSB and where she returned after completing her MBA this spring.

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Palestrant, who had lived in China, mentioned to Niko Canner, a founder and managing partner, that focusing on companies' need to develop and retain people and create a high-performance workplace culture in China would be a worthwhile project for the firm. A half-hour later, they had developed the vision for China 2024.

Participants will complete a detailed survey online every year about their perception of their progress, the business climate, and their aspirations, and then once every four years, Palestrant and her colleagues will conduct in-depth interviews to gain a better understanding of the participants' leadership development. Canner and Palestrant plan to write articles for business publications and produce a book in

A Look at the MBA Generation

Of the 115 MBAs participating in China 2024, several Chicago GSB alumnae already see benefits to being part of it.

Aroma Chen, '04, said, "I believe my career is linked to China and its booming economy. China 2024 offers a close community for people who have diverse backgrounds but the same career aspirations." **Mandy Guo, '04**, echoed the sentiment. "I hope it serves as a platform to build up a virtual community for the participants and beyond," she said.

Having regular contact with a group of top MBAs will motivate **Kathy Wang, '04**, to get ahead. "Everybody in this group is outstanding, and they're working hard and making progress, so I can't just stay on the same level," she said. Wang knows the group members have much to learn from each other, including each other's failures. For that kind of exchange, the privacy provided by China 2024 is key. "Most of us will not only make successes in our lives, but also encounter many difficulties and even failures. It will be great if we can share those lessons so others won't need to make the same mistakes. But in order to do this, you have to be a very private community, and people need to trust each other," she said.

Stacy Palestrant, '05, who launched the study with Katzenbach Partners LLC, understands their enthusiasm. "I think the appeal is being part of the MBA generation," she said. "There's camaraderie among people who are going to be business leaders in China. They're paving a new course for themselves and their country." —P.H.

2025. The study already is the subject of a television documentary set for release in 2008, which will follow the lives of 10 individuals in the first four years after business school.

For Katzenbach Partners, the long-term project will produce the kind of insight clients seek in understanding China and its human capital. "Given the expansion of the Chinese domestic market as well as Chinese companies that want to become global, the issue of developing business leadership in China is critical," Canner said. "There is a limited supply of professional managers, so it is very important to build an environment in which these younger leaders can have an impact and develop careers." Canner hopes the book will put a face on Chinese business executives and explain the forces that shaped their evolution, Canner said.

He and Palestrant decided to focus on Chinese citizens who were fluent in English and had graduated in 2004 from top business schools in the United States and China, including Chicago GSB (see "Chicago GSB Alumni Part of China 2024," page 31). "We were looking for thoughtful people who had a high level of commitment and desire to be part of this project for 20 years. We also wanted a diversity in terms of their industry focus and personalities," Palestrant said.

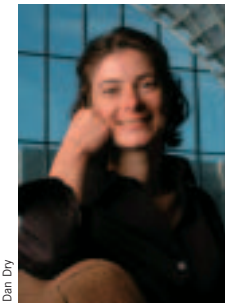
Choosing the Chinese schools was among the first steps. "MBAs in China are very new," she said. "Most business schools have only been in existence for 10 to 15 years. We decided to collaborate with several reputable schools to get a broad cross-section of China's young business talent."

During the summer of 2003, Palestrant traveled to China and described the study to the career services departments and faculty at Beijing International MBA at Peking University, China Europe International Business School, Fudan University, and Tsinghua University. "They were very interested in having their students be part of it because they want to know how this cohort of Chinese MBAs will fare in the marketplace," she said.

After an extensive application process, 115 MBAs from the class of 2004 were chosen for China 2024. Seventy came from Chinese schools; the other 45 were graduates of Chicago GSB, Columbia, Harvard, Kellogg, Stanford, and Wharton. The group also represents a wide range of fields: banking, consulting, media, technology, retail and consumer products, and health care.

With a colleague, Palestrant conducted the 90-minute initial interviews with each member of the study. She was surprised at their openness. "I did not feel like I was getting

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—Stacy Palestrant, '05

pat answers. I think they saw this as an opportunity to tell their story. They wanted to share with the world what it's like to be a young business professional in China."

The researchers asked about the participants' family background, previous work experience, reasons for choosing an MBA, their desired career path, and their motivation to succeed. They also inquired about their visions for the future for China's economy and society and about their personal ambitions.

"The young professionals have fascinating stories. They are at the forefront of change; many worked at state-owned enterprises before their MBA and now are working at Fortune 500 companies, top-tier banks and consulting firms—or they are entrepreneurs. I gained an appreciation for how hard they worked to get where they are," Palestrant said.

"Now they have incredible choices in front of them, and a lot of them are sorting it out. Their top priority is to gain on-the-job skills and training that will allow them to succeed either at their current company or somewhere else. Regardless of their path, this generation will lead the charge in China's transformation, and through China 2024, we will gain an appreciation for how they will do it." ■

Chicago GSB Alumni Part of China 2024

China 2024 will follow 13 Chicago GSB alumni from the class of 2004:

Xuefang (Aroma) Chen

Marketing analyst at BP in Warrenville, Illinois

Lisa Feng

Investment banking associate at Goldman Sachs in New York

Man (Mandy) Guo

Vice president of marketing at HealthSource Global Staffing in San Francisco

Xiaoyan (Lydia) Guo

Associate with the corporate finance group at McKinsey in Shanghai

Peng (Ethan) Hu

Manager in global commercial development at Novartis Pharmaceuticals in Florham Park, New Jersey

Bo Liu

Manager of global corporate development at Charles River Laboratories in Boston

Ming (Rocket) Pan

Principal at Gladius Investment Management in Barrington, Illinois

Yan Song

Associate at Lehman Brothers in Tokyo

Yue (Kathy) Wang

Partner at Sincerity Financial Consulting in Beijing

Zhifang (Shary) Wu

Equity research associate at a firm in Purchase, New York

Hongyan (Robin) Zhang

Project manager at Kennametal in Latrobe, Pennsylvania

Ye (Linda) Zhang

Consultant at Bain in Shanghai

Qintong (Terrance) Zhou

China CFO and director of consolidation and external reporting at Lenovo Group Ltd. in Beijing