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Internationalisation and Innovation of Chinese Law Firms

Research Report 2022



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Executive Summary

This report is based on the data collected from a survey and interviews conducted by a research team based in Trinity College Dublin. The team has long focused on the internationalisation of law firms in terms of their internationalisation strategy, cross-border people & knowledge management, and the adoption of digital technology.

This project aims to explore the drivers that affect the internationalisation of Chinese law firms and lawyers, including human resources management, business operations, digital technology applications, knowledge learning and innovation and entry modes into unknown markets. The report seeks to provide insights into the question of how law firms from emerging markets, as latecomers, can internationalise successfully and overcome the challenges encountered in the international markets.

In particular, this study focuses on three important outcomes relating to the internationalisation of Chinese law firms:

- (1) Unit performance
- (2) Strategy implementation
- (3) Innovation in service

Four theory drivers for the above outcomes were investigated:

- (1) Globalisation and localisation
- (2) International people management
- (3) Ambidextrous management
- (4) Technology and digitalisation

This executive summary provides a broad overview of the main findings from the survey. The main report provides a more in-depth overview of the findings based on the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews with participants who are working in internationalised Chinese law firms. The researchers carried out a detailed analysis of the data, which involved statistical modelling in identifying the drivers that have the greatest impact on performance outcomes. The complete findings are available in the full report.

Summary of Key Findings

The findings are highlighted below:

- Internationalised Chinese law firms have been performing well in terms of both operational (e.g., relations among employees, client satisfaction) and market performance (e.g., increase in revenue, profitability).
- Most internationalised Chinese law firms agreed that the novel strategy that they adopted was implemented successfully in their units.
- The majority of internationalised Chinese law firms are performing well in innovation, e.g., opening up new markets, introducing new services, and extending their service range.
- Technology & digitalisation were found to be the most important driver for sustaining the business performance of internationalised Chinese law firms.

- Significant differences and complexity exist between home and host countries when Chinese law firms expand abroad.
- The in-depth interviews revealed how internationalised Chinese law firms navigate the complexity between home and host countries via (1) experimentation-based internationalisation, (2) management practices to maintain their Chinese identity, and (3) managing the national and international paradox via ambidextrous management.

Conclusion and Key Recommendations

Overall, the findings highlight that an increasing number of Chinese law firms have internationalised their legal service worldwide and established global service networks to offer customised services to their clients. The internationalised Chinese law firms are confident and have made significant progress in their internationalisation, even though the incumbents are mainly from developed countries.

Despite the positive progress, internationalised Chinese law firms face great challenges in managing the legal, political, and cultural complexity between home and host countries when they expand abroad. The research findings suggest that three ingredients are required in order to successfully overcome the challenges of internationalising Chinese law firms and lawyers.

- **Having/building a global mindset**

For law firms to adapt to the increasing volatility, complexity, and uncertainty in dynamic international environments and markets, managers and lawyers in the internationalised Chinese law firms need to have a global mindset. They deeply appreciate the imperative of and challenges in providing cross-border legal services given that their clients have been internationalising rapidly in recent decades. As a result, they can quickly respond to clients' requirements on the global stage. Additionally, having or building a global mindset can enable more Chinese law firms to attain and sustain their international reputation and market position.

- **Adopting flexible and agile management**

There is an urgent need to develop and leverage more innovative and flexible forms of global management. Lawyers and managers of Chinese law firms need to be more mindful of managing the national and international paradox (i.e., growing internationally but maintaining the Chinese identity) when they enter foreign markets and provide cross-border professional services. Firms can establish a flat and flexible structure where each unit is rooted deeply in the local culture, recruiting local experts to their workforce with an understanding of local legal systems and government policies. They can also pursue standardised and flexible management simultaneously and develop their firm-specific advantages by adopting ambidexterity in their service and management during internationalisation.

- **Further enhancing technology and digitalisation**

The internationalisation process is being disrupted by technology. In this regard, law firms from China have advantages when compared to traditional law firms from developed economies. As latecomers into the global market, Chinese law firms can rapidly capture market opportunities, meet clients' needs, and adopt a digital transformation strategy to transform their management and service delivery. They also need to keep abreast of developments in technology.

Authors



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The authors would like to express our gratitude to all the professionals and organisations who participated in the survey and interviews, providing valuable insights into the internationalisation of law firms. This project covers cross-border HR management, internationalisation strategy, and the adoption of digital technology in international law firms. The purpose of this research is to better understand the internationalisation of Chinese law firms and lawyers, including human resources management, business operations, digital technology applications, knowledge learning and innovation.

Sincere thanks are also due to our colleagues from Trinity Business School who supported this project. Our gratitude is also extended to the PhD students, Miss Xuan Kou, Miss Weihan Jia, Miss Yue Sun, and Mr Neil Lowndes, who helped back-translate, pilot and promote the survey.

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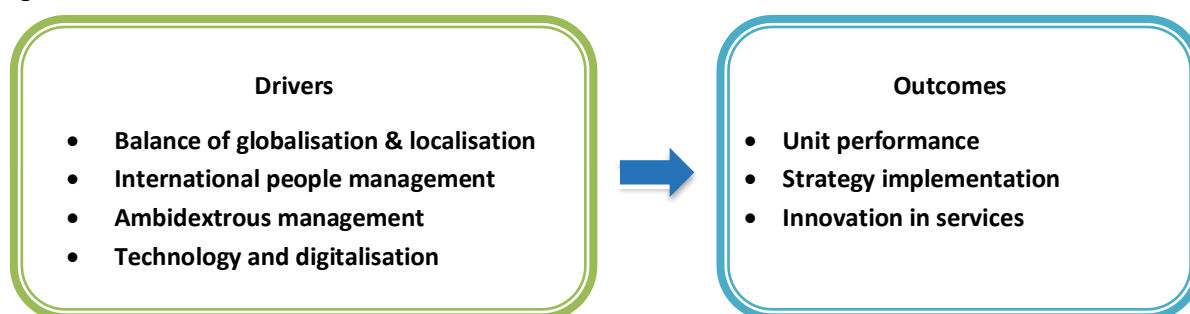
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

As the largest emerging market, China experienced successful economic development over the past four decades (Brennan & Vecchi, 2021; Collison, Brennan, & Rios-Morales, 2017), providing an excellent environment for Chinese law firms to expand domestically and globally. As a result, it produced many of the world's youngest and largest corporate law firms, some of which have internationalised their legal service across the world (Liu & Wu, 2016). As an important emerging market, China provides an excellent environment to construct a theory of law firm expansion and internationalisation (Li, 2019; Stern & Li, 2016). Thus, this project focused on internationalised Chinese law firms that have offices outside Mainland China¹.

The research team developed a survey to examine a number of drivers that potentially influence different aspects of Chinese law firm performance, including unit performance, strategic implementation, and innovation in services. This project focused on law firms from China that have internationalised overseas. The main drivers promoting the performance were explored, and the relationship between them was assessed from data collected from experienced lawyers and partners. These main drivers included: (1) balance of globalisation & localisation, (2) international people management, (3) ambidextrous management, and (4) technology & digitalisation. Understanding the relationship of the drivers and performance of internationalised Chinese law firms is critical for legal practitioners, especially for those who serve international clients. A summary of the major drivers and outcomes explored in the study are presented in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Potential drivers and outcomes



1.2 Structure of the Report

The report contains five main sections. Section 2 provides the method used in the study. Section 3 presents an overview of the respondents' backgrounds. Section 4 details survey findings for internationalised Chinese law firms. Section 5 identifies the key drivers for the unit performance of these law firms. Section 6 presents the outcome of the interviews. Section 7 includes key conclusions and recommendations.

¹ Owing to the different legal systems, Hongkong, Macao and Taiwan are regarded as international locations for Chinese law firms.

2. Methodology

This project had four phases as reported below: systematic literature review, instrument development, data collection, and analyses.

2.1 Systematic Literature Review

To understand the research conducted on internationalised Chinese law firms, the researchers conducted a systematic literature review on the internationalisation of professional service firms in the past five decades (1970-2020). This includes 227 academic articles. This review is available upon request. A brief literature review is provided in Appendix A.

2.2 Instrument Development

Based on the extensive literature review, a survey instrument was developed to capture the drivers and outcomes of the internationalisation of Chinese law firms. It included the key constructs such as globalisation & localisation, organisational ambidexterity, business strategy, IHRM alignment & flexibility, absorptive capability, and technology & digitalisation. The instrument was originally developed in English and translated into Chinese using the back-translation method. It was reviewed and tested by PhD candidates of Trinity Business School. Their comments were incorporated to improve the clarity, face validity and comprehensiveness of the instruments.

An interview guide based on the literature about internationalisation and management (McQuillan, Scott, & Mangematin, 2018; Pinnington & Gray, 2007; Segal-Horn & Dean, 2007; Winch, 2014) was developed. The open questions helped us to gain a detailed understanding of how Chinese law firms internationalise their legal services and manage cross-border cooperation, especially the tension between global integration and local responsiveness.

2.3 Data Collection

Two types of data were collected from experienced lawyers and partners of internationalised Chinese law firms between May and September 2021. The first type is quantitative data via an anonymous online survey via invitation and two reminders.

The second type of data was collected via open-ended, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews with lawyers who had been working in internationalised Chinese law firms for at least five years and were familiar with the internationalisation process and firm management. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. This project followed the principles of strict confidentiality and voluntary participation. It did not collect any personal private or firm trade information.

2.4 Data Analyses

The analysis of quantitative data and presentation of the data predominantly involved descriptive statistics such as frequencies. Descriptive statistics were used to explore the participants' views on different aspects of their work. Statistical analysis was completed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.26). Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

To analyse the qualitative interview data, we used a thematic analysis process (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Gioia & Pitre, 1990) to assist with the categorisation and interpretation of our data. This method is adopted widely in qualitative social research. NVivo was used to conduct the analysis.

3. Survey Participation

3.1 Survey Response Rate

A total of 152 responses were received from overseas units of the internationalised Chinese law firms, generating an overall response rate of 67.6%.

3.2 Respondents' Backgrounds

Figures 3.1 to 3.7 provide an overview of the respondents who worked in Internationalised Chinese law firms. Below is a breakdown of the sample.

- **Gender:** 26% were male; and 74% were female.
- **Education:** Over half of the respondents (63%) held a master's degree as the highest educational level, followed by a PhD (20%) and a bachelor's degree (17%).
- **Work experience in the current units of law firm:** The majority of the respondents (70%) had under 5 years of working experience; followed by 16% working from 6 to 10 years, and 14% working over 11 years in their current unit.
- **Title:** 15% of the participants were Founding Partners; 44% were Senior Partners; 33% were Junior Partners and 8% were Lawyers.

The current unit of the law firm, the unit size, years in business, number of non-Chinese lawyers and location are specified below.

- **Unit size:** Most respondents (92%) worked in a unit which had less than 500 employees, while 8% worked in a unit with over 500 employees.
- **Years in business:** The average years in business was 16. Nearly half of the of the participants (48%) worked in a firm which had been operating less than 5 years; 16% worked in a firm operating from 6 to 10 years; 17% worked in a firm operating from 11 to 15 years; and 19% worked in a firm operating from 16 to 20 years.
- **Number of non-Chinese lawyers:** 84% reported up to 10 non-Chinese lawyers; 12% reported 11 to 50 non-Chinese lawyers; and only 4% reported over 50 non-Chinese lawyers in their current unit.
- **Location:** Respondents' units were located in 16 countries around the world, including 68% in Asia, 16% in North America, 13% in Europe and 3% in Oceania.

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

Figure 3.1 Gender

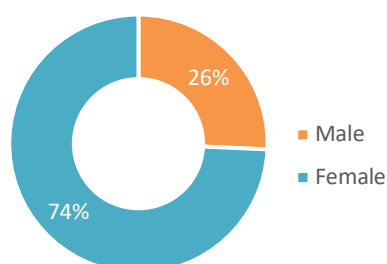


Figure 3.2 Education

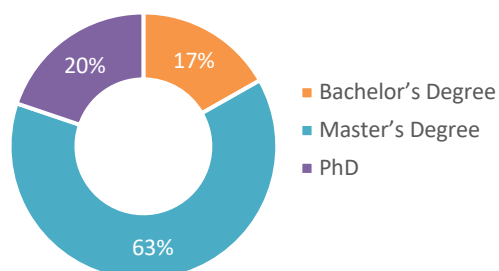


Figure 3.3 Work Experience in the Unit

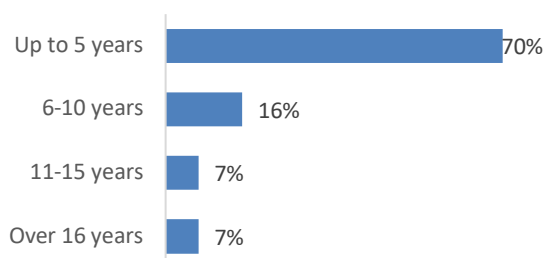
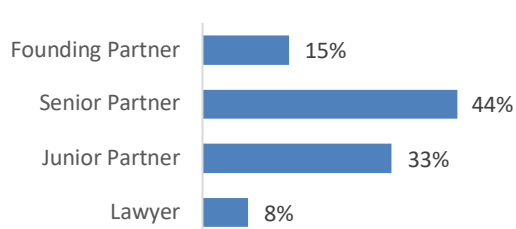


Figure 3.4 Working Title



RESPONDENTS' UNITS/FIRMS PROFILE

Figure 3.5 Firm/Unit Size

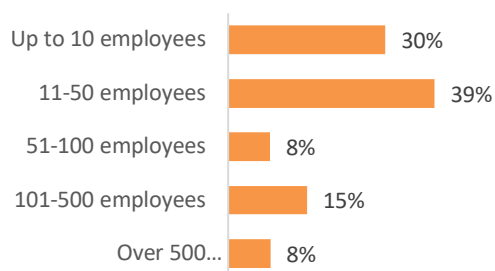


Figure 3.6 Unit/Firm Age

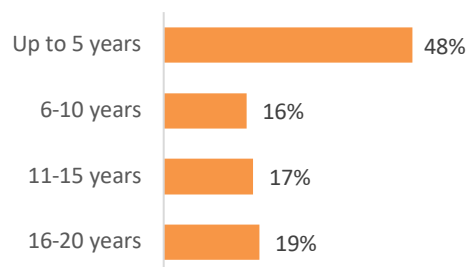


Figure 3.7 Number of Non-Chinese Lawyers

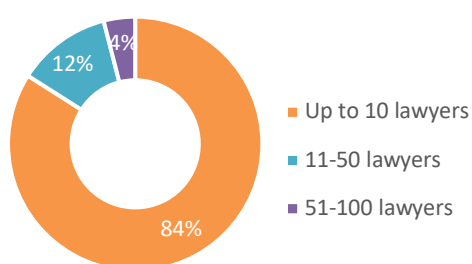
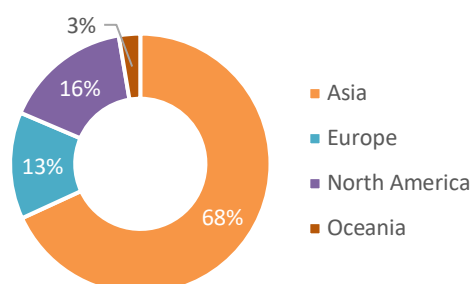
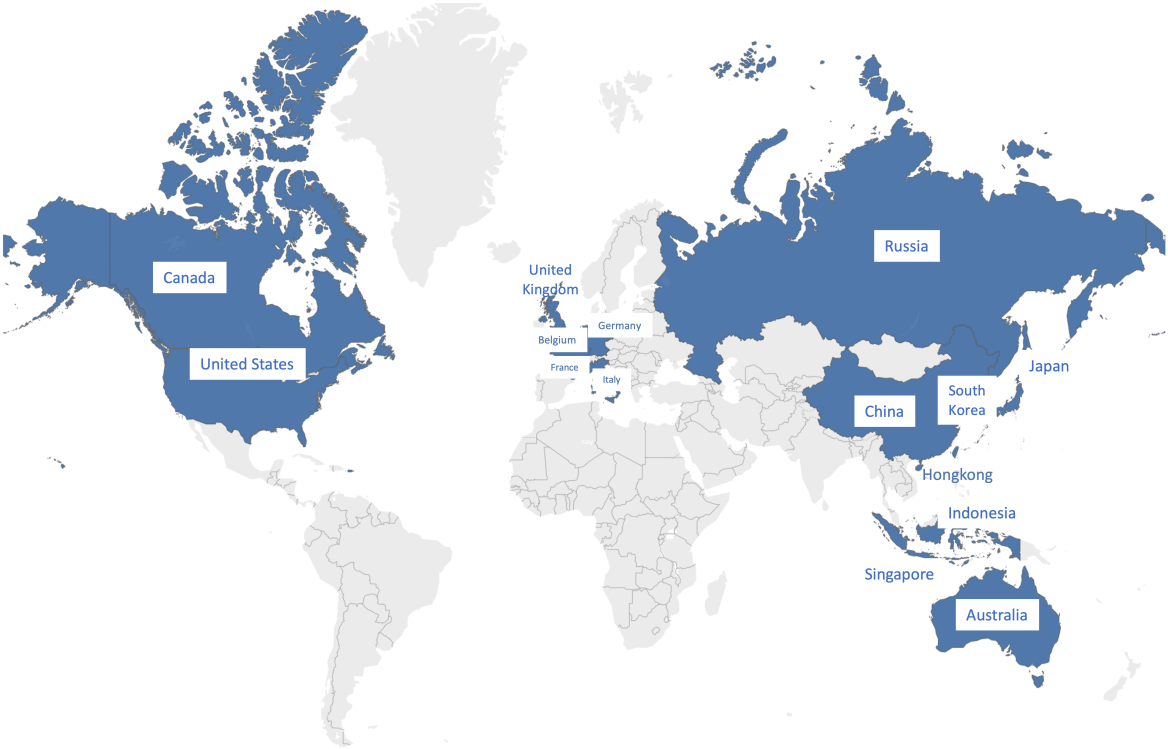


Figure 3.8 Unit Location



GLOBAL COVERAGE

Figure 3.9 Unit Locations of the Internationalised Chinese Law Firms



4. Survey Findings

This section provides an overview of the main findings from the survey of internationalised Chinese law firms. These findings are based on respondents' experiences of their current work and organisations. For each sample, an overview of findings on two main areas (1) internationalisation outcomes and (2) people & management, are presented.

In addition, an analysis of the mean score for each dimension, i.e., the aggregated scores for each question belonging to the dimension, is provided in order to examine the differences in respondents' experiences. This type of analysis examines whether differences in the mean scores between various groups are statistically significant².

Internationalised Chinese law firms are characterised by four criteria: 1) country of origin, which means sample firms have to be established in Mainland China and owned by Chinese lawyers; 2) official registration, which means sample firms were registered officially in China; 3) having local branches in China, which means sample firms own local branches in Chinese cities and exclude those who were set up in China but only operated in foreign markets; and 4) having overseas offices, which means sample firms own at least one overseas branch/office, including those in the regions of Hong Kong, Macao, and/or Taiwan as well as in the countries of Japan, Singapore, the US, UK, Germany and other countries. These criteria ensured that all sample firms were Chinese law firms that had been internationalised. The research team randomly selected law firms which have been registered in China and have overseas offices.

4.1 Internationalisation Outcomes

In terms of internationalisation outcomes, this survey explores unit performance, strategy implementation and innovation in services which are important indicators for internationalisation success.

4.1.1 Unit Performance

The survey explores two aspects of unit performance, viz., operational and marketing performance. The operational performance includes quality of services, development of new services, satisfaction of clients, relations between partners/directors and employees as well as among employees in general, and ability to attract and retain essential employees. In terms of market performance, the survey examines the growth in revenue, profitability, marketing and market share. Respondents were asked to rate their unit performance relative to competitors on a scale of 1 – 6 where 1 = much worse and 6 = much better.

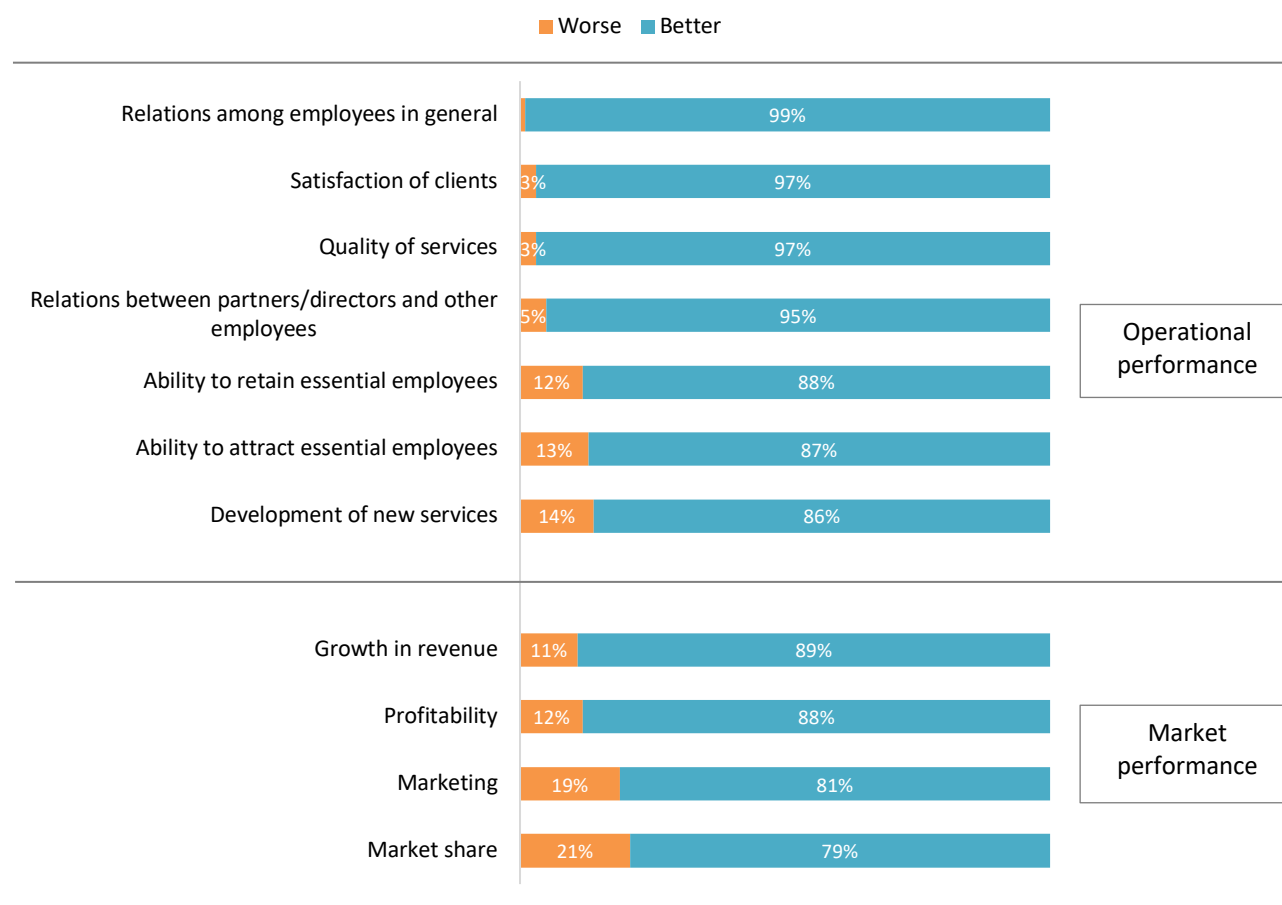
Figure 4.1 presents the findings on the unit performance of internationalised Chinese law firms.

² In the area of statistics, the term *significant* does not mean *important* or *meaningful*, as is implied in the everyday use of the term. A result is deemed **statistically significant** if it is unlikely to have occurred by chance, and therefore provides enough evidence to signal that group means are different.

Overall, the majority of respondents reported that the operational and market performance of their units of law firms was getting better after their firms had internationalised into the international market.

- Unit operational performance:** An improvement in relations among employees in general was reported by most respondents (99%), followed by satisfaction of clients (97%), quality of services (97%), relations between partners/directors and employees (95%), ability to retain essential employees (88%), ability to attract essential employees (87%) and development of new services (86%).
- Unit market performance:** Over 80% reported an increase in revenue (89%), profitability (88%) and marketing (81%) of their units. The increase in market share was also recorded by 79% of the sample.

Figure 4.1 Unit Performance

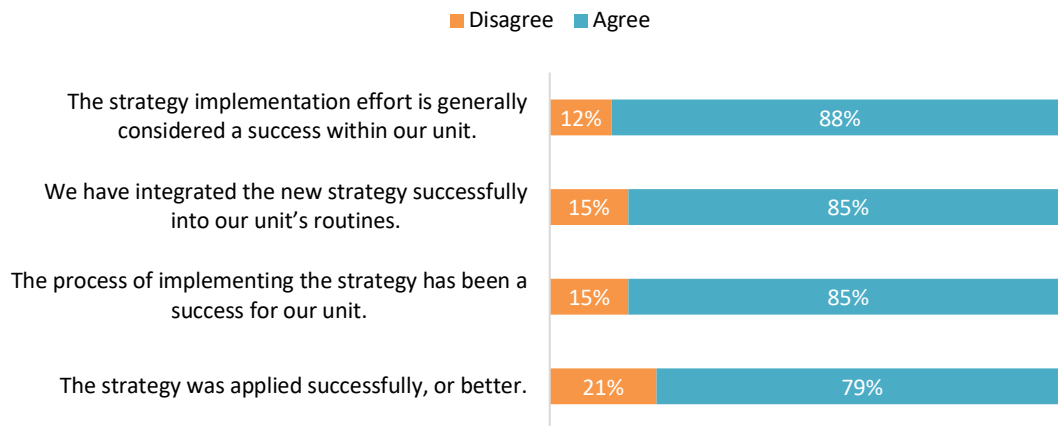


4.1.2 Strategy Implementation

Absorptive capacity is broadly understood as a firm’s ability to recognise, assimilate, and exploit new and external knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Cross & Israelit, 2021). It is important to law firms because their input and output are the knowledge embedded in their people (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Zardkoohi et al., 2011). Figure 4.2 highlights that the respondents provided a positive view on the

enactment of absorptive capacity in their current units. Over 80% of the sample agreed that the new strategy was implemented successfully in their units.

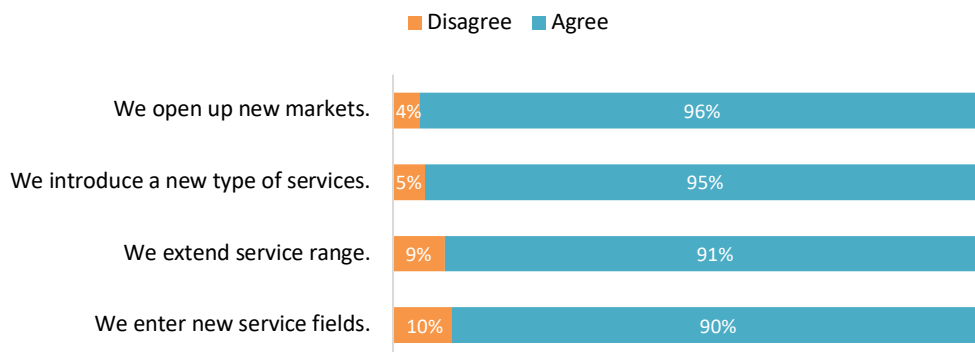
Figure 4.2 Strategy Implementation



4.1.3 Innovation in Services

The survey also explores the innovation in services of the units of the law firm. Figure 4.3 illustrates the findings on different aspects of innovation and efficiency. In terms of innovation, over 90% of the respondents indicated that their units open up new markets (96%), introduce a new type of services (95%), extend service range (91%) and enter new service fields (90%).

Figure 4.3 Innovation



4.2 People and Management

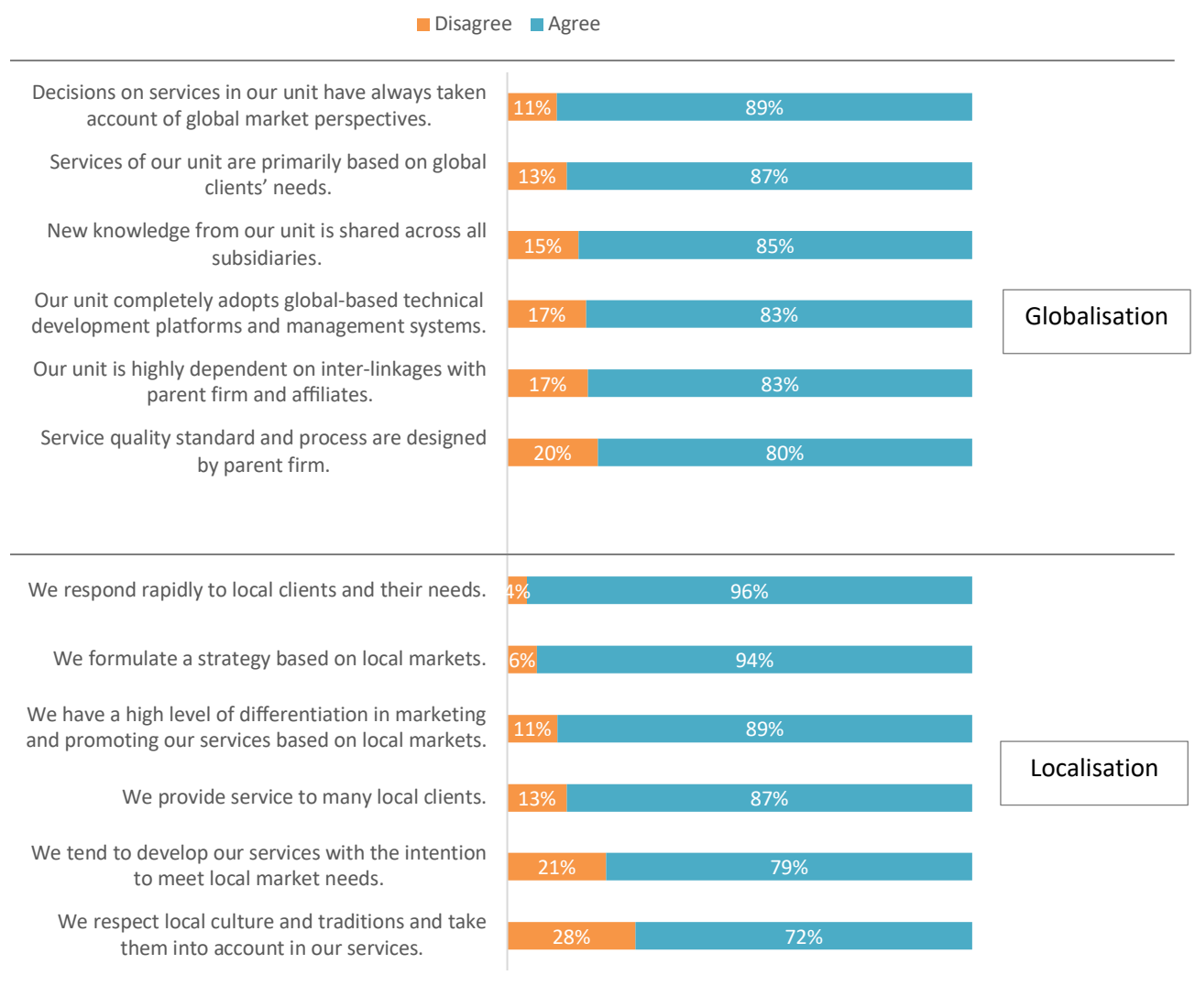
People and services are important to the performance of law firms as human capital with professional knowledge is considered as the key asset which plays an important role in law firm internationalisation. Professionals as knowledge repositories have the intelligence, skill, knowledge, and expertise to provide customised services to domestic and international clients (Bello et al., 2016). The survey examines a range of aspects of people and service in internationalised Chinese law firms, including globalisation & localisation, international people management, ambidextrous management and technology & digitalisation.

4.2.1 Globalisation and Localisation

A firm’s ability to balance both globalisation and localisation has become increasingly critical for its growth and survival (Williams et al., 2017). For law firms, globalisation refers to the capability to provide legal service on the global stage in effective ways. Firms integrate their management and resources in order to gain efficiencies, to reduce costs, maintain global consistency, access raw resources and competition worldwide, and develop global technology platforms (Prahalad & Doz, 1987). Meanwhile, localisation implies the firms’ ability to adapt and respond to diverse consumer tastes and varying rules in government regulation and to business cultures of local markets (Williams et al., 2017).

Figure 4.4 shows the respondents’ perception of globalisation and localisation in the current units of their law firm. Overall, their units demonstrated a high level of ability to handle globalisation and localisation. The detailed findings are presented as below.

Figure 4.4 Globalisation and Localisation



Globalisation:

- 89% agreed that the decisions on service of their units always took account of global market perspectives.
- 87% agreed that services of their unit were primarily based on global clients' needs.
- 85% agreed that new knowledge was shared across all subsidiaries.
- 83% agreed that their units completely adopted global-based technical development platforms and management systems.
- 83% agreed that their units were highly dependent on inter-linkages with parent firms and affiliates.
- 80% agreed that service quality standards and processes were designed by parent firms.

Localisation:

- 96% agreed that their units responded rapidly to local clients and their needs.
- 94% agreed that their units formulate a strategy based on local markets.
- 89% agreed that their units have a high level of differentiation in marketing and promoting their services based on local markets.
- 87% agreed that their units provide service to many local clients.
- 79% agreed that their units developed their services to meet local market needs
- 72% agreed that their units respect local culture and traditions and take them into account in their services.

4.2.2 International People Management

International people management or international human resource management (IHRM) plays an important role in helping the internationalised Chinese law firms to achieve high performance. This report examines two characteristics of IHRM in the internationalised law firms from China, including *alignment* and *flexibility*. IHRM alignment means the units need to integrate and align their systems with the business goals of the whole firm and facilitate change and learning in their businesses. In contrast, IHRM flexibility means the units have the autonomy to adjust HR management to some extent to fit their business environment (Beletskiy and Fey, 2020).

Figure 4.5 illustrates findings on IHRM alignment and flexibility. The results highlight that a higher percentage of respondents had a more positive view of IHRM flexibility than IHRM alignment in their current law firm units.

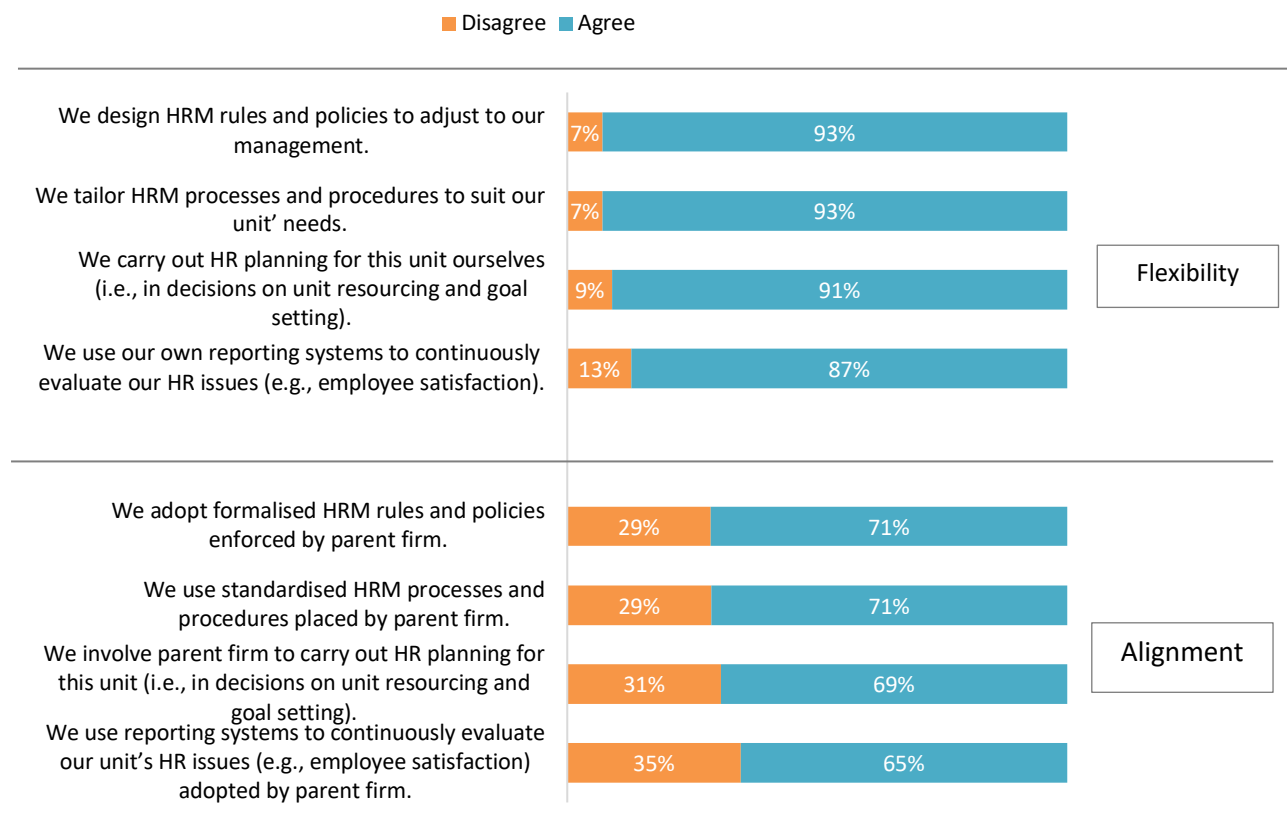
IHRM flexibility:

- 93% agreed that their units designed HRM rules and policies to adjust to their management as well as tailored HRM processes and procedures to suit the units' needs.
- 91% agreed that their units carried out HR planning for their units themselves.
- 87% agreed that they used their own reporting systems to continuously evaluate their HR issues.

IHRM alignment:

- 71% agreed that their units adopted formalised HRM rules and policies as well as standardised HRM processes and procedures developed by parent firms.
- 69% agreed that their units involved parent firms in carrying out HR planning for their units
- 65% agreed that their units used reporting systems adopted by the parent firms to evaluate their units’ HR issues.

Figure 4.5 International Human Resource Management



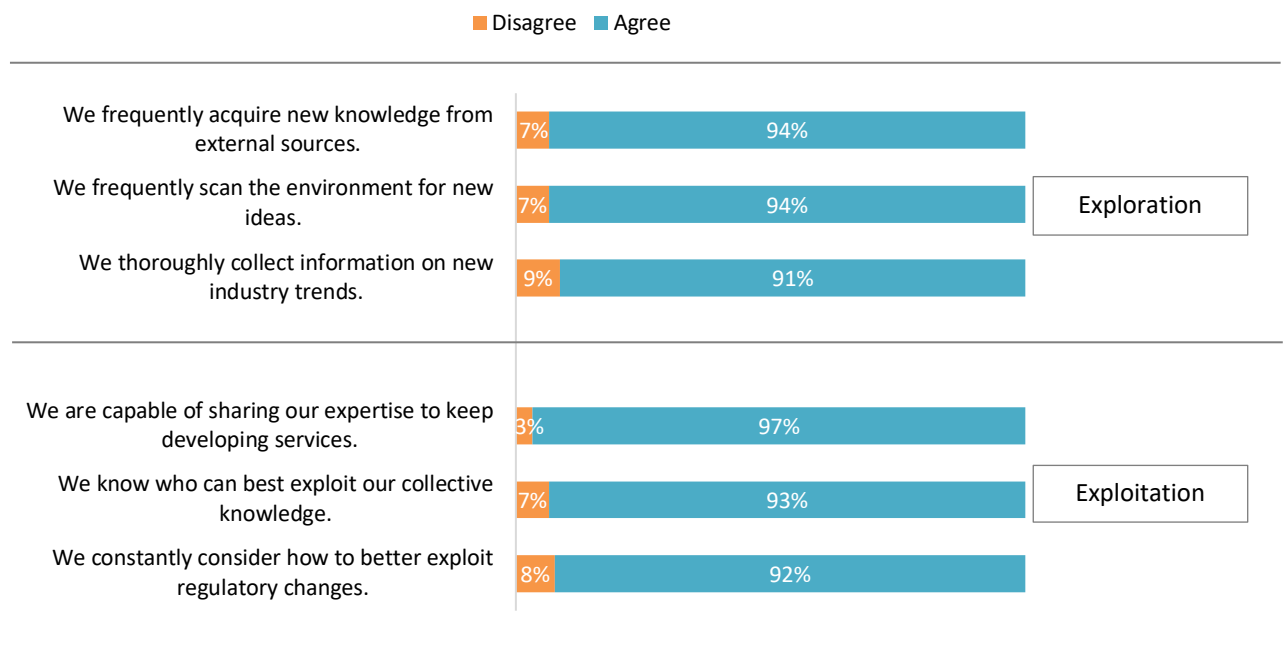
4.2.3 Ambidextrous Management

Organisational ambidexterity refers to an ability to balance exploration and exploitation, which allows the firms to be creative and adaptable while also continuing to rely on more traditional, proven methods of business (Fu et al., 2017). Exploration means the ability to utilise the firm’s internal and external resources to meet today’s business needs. Meanwhile, exploitation refers to the ability to utilise the firm’s internal and external resources in order to be adaptive to future market opportunities. Organisational ambidexterity has increasingly become critical to law firms when law firms follow their clients to internationalise by offering a customised service (Hitt et al., 2006; Krull, Smith, & Ge, 2012).

Figures 4.6 presents the findings on exploration and exploitation in the units of the internationalised Chinese law firms. The results highlight that most units achieved the ability to balance exploration and exploitation. In terms of exploration, 94% agreed that their units frequently scanned the environment

for new ideas and acquired new knowledge from external sources; and 91% agreed that they thoroughly collected information on new industry trends. While focusing on exploration, most respondents indicated that their units were also capable of exploiting their existing services, such as sharing their expertise in order to keep developing services (97%), knowing who can best exploit their collective knowledge (93%) and constantly considering how to better exploit regulatory changes (92%).

Figure 4.6 Ambidextrous Management

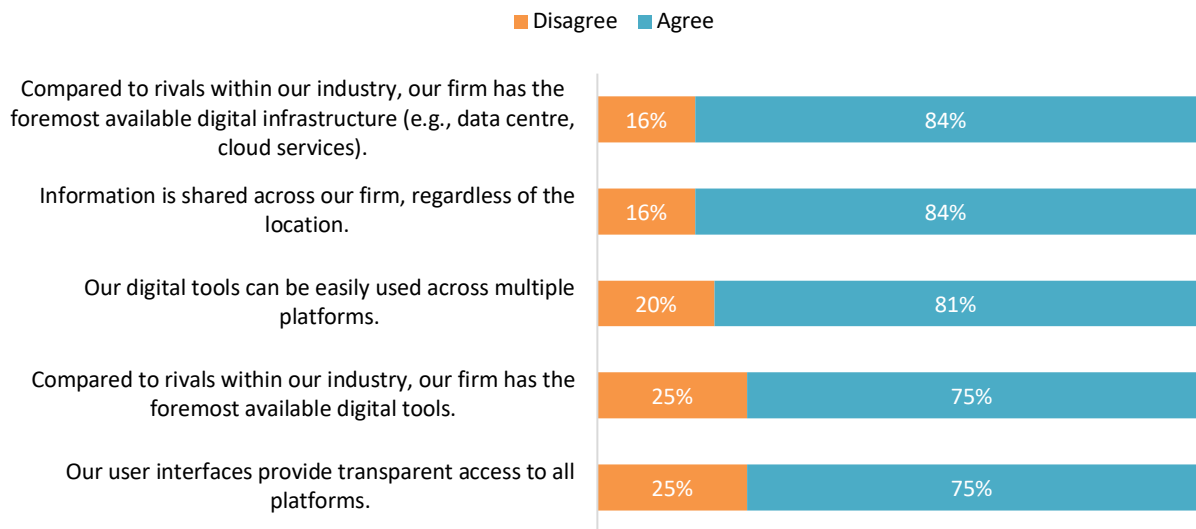


4.2.4 Technology and Digitalisation

Technology and Digitalisation are considered to have impacts on firm performance. The survey findings show that the majority of respondents' law firms achieved a good level of technology and digitalisation. **Figure 4.7** details the findings on this aspect.

- 84% agreed that their firms had the foremost available digital infrastructure.
- 84% agreed that information was shared across the firms regardless of the location.
- 81% agreed that their firms' digital tools could be easily used across multiple platforms.
- 75% agreed that their firms had the foremost available digital tools compared to rivals within their industry.
- 75% agreed that the user interfaces provided transparent access to all platforms.

Figure 4.7 Technology and Digitalisation



5. Drivers Analysis

This study investigates a broad range of factors affecting internationalisation outcomes, including unit performance, strategy implementation, innovation in services. In order to identify those factors that are most important for internationalisation outcomes, a key driver analysis was undertaken for internationalised Chinese law firms. This analysis uses a number of statistical techniques to help interpret the results so actionable measures can be identified. Following each analysis, we plotted each driver with the largest impact on each outcome against its presence across the 152 overseas units of the internationalised Chinese law firms (i.e., its mean score). This helps to identify the features that need to be developed, monitored and improved.

5.1 Drivers for Unit Performance

Figure 5.1 plots the main drivers of unit operational performance. The findings show that the most important drivers of operational performance are: (1) Technology and Digitalisation, (2) Exploitation, (3) Localisation, (4) Exploration, (5) Globalisation and (6) IHRM flexibility. Among these factors, the areas in most need of attention are *Technology & Digitalisation* and *IHRM flexibility*, which had a lower presence but higher impact category on unit operational performance. Given their relatively high presence, other factors (*Exploitation, Localisation and Exploration*) need to be monitored and maintained.

Figure 5.1 Drivers of Unit Operational Performance

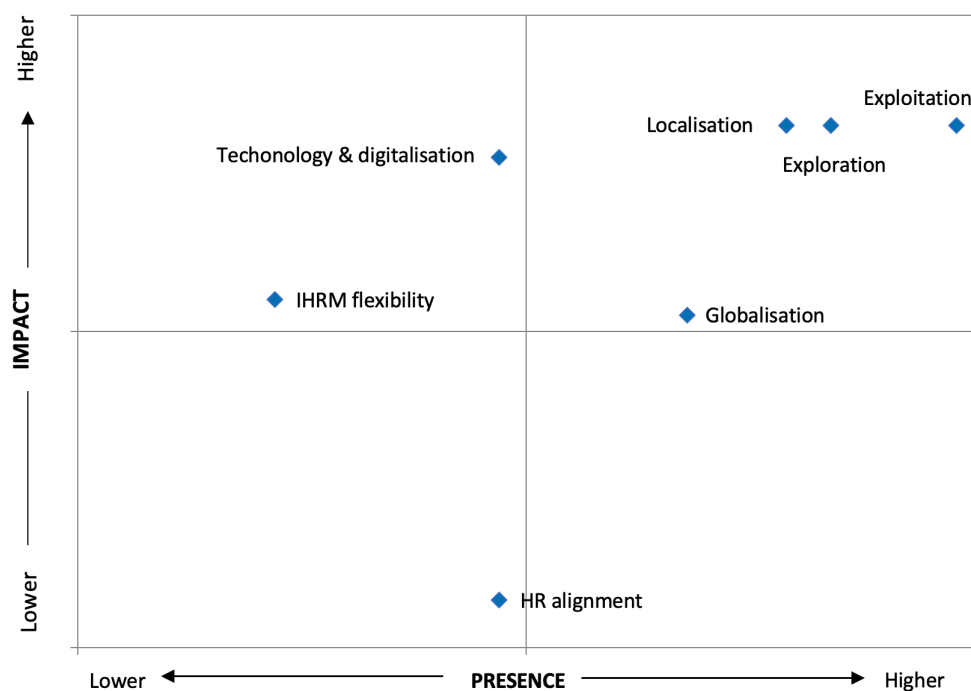
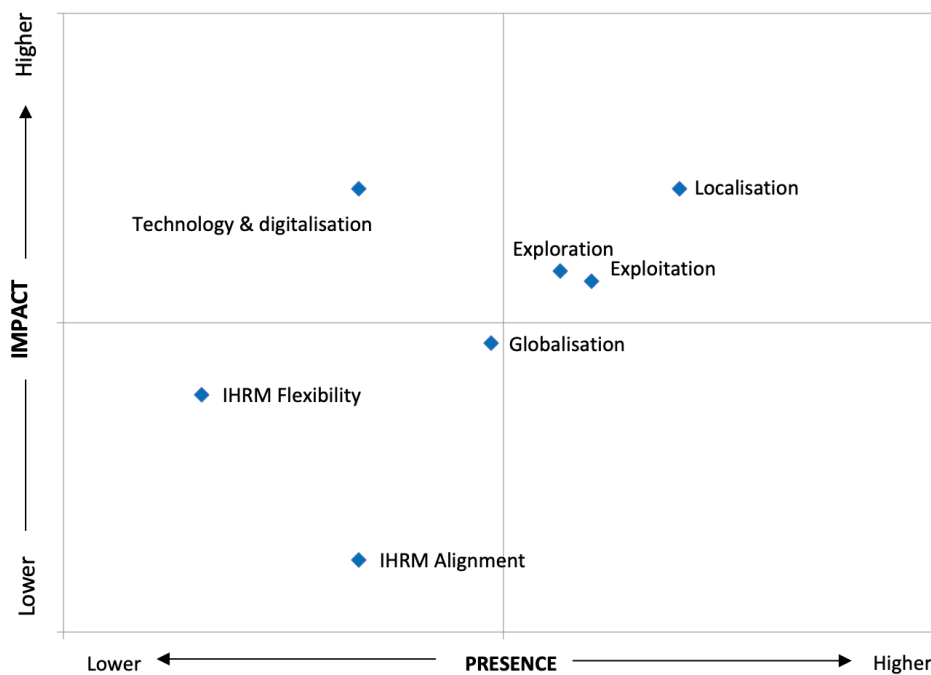


Figure 5.2 presents the main drivers of unit market performance. The results show that the most important drivers of market performance are: (1) Technology and Digitalisation, (2) Localisation, (3) Exploration, and (4) Exploitation. The area deserving the most attention is *Technology & Digitalisation*, which had a lower presence but higher impact category on unit market performance compared to

other factors. Given their relatively high presence, *Localisation*, *Exploration* and *Exploitation* need to be monitored and maintained.

Figure 5.2 Drivers of Unit Market Performance



5.2 Drivers for Strategy Implementation

Figure 5.3 highlights that the most important drivers of absorptive capacity are: (1) Technology and digitalisation, (2) Exploration, and (3) Exploitation. While all factors significantly influence the strategy implementation of the law firm units, *Technology & Digitalisation* needs the most attention, given its lower presence but higher influence compared to other factors. In addition, *Exploration* and *Exploitation* need to be monitored and maintained as they show a relatively high presence and impact.

5.3 Drivers for Innovation in Services

Figure 5.4 shows that the most important drivers of innovation in services for the units of internationalised Chinese law firms are: (1) Localisation, (2) Exploitation, (3) Exploration, (4) Technology and Digitalisation, and (5) IHRM flexibility. The areas in need of improvement are *Technology & digitalisation* and *HR flexibility*, which have a relatively low presence but high impact on innovation of the unit. *Localisation*, *Exploration* and *Exploitation* had the highest impact and a relatively high presence, so they need to be monitored and maintained.

Figure 5.3 Drivers of Strategy Implementation

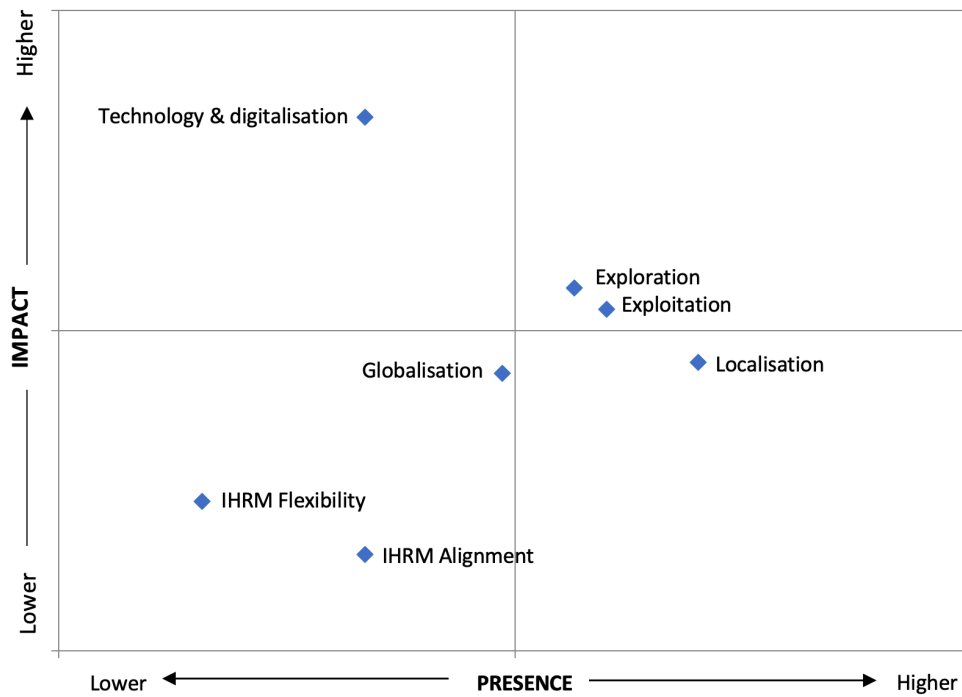
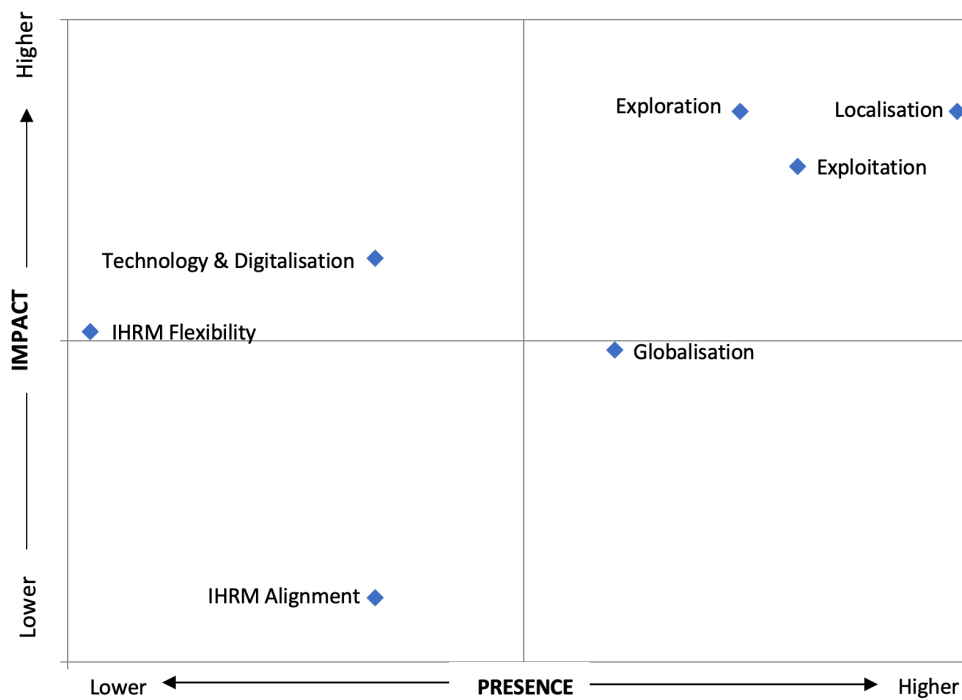


Figure 5.4 Drivers of Innovation in Service



6. Findings of Comments and Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 experienced managing partners and experienced lawyers in internationalised Chinese law firms. To further understand the perspective of an under-explored phenomenon, the internationalisation of Chinese law firms, thematic analysis was carried out on the collected interviews. This process involved reading, understanding and coding the data, enabling the research team to generate higher-order constructs and themes. Three independent coders analysed the interview data. The coding process was repeated until a clear and shared understanding, and interpretation was reached among the researchers.

As a result, four main themes emerged:

- (1) drivers for growing globally and maintaining the Chinese identity;
- (2) experimentation-based internationalisation;
- (3) management practices to maintain the Chinese identity;
- (4) managing the national and international paradox via ambidextrous management.

The results from the thematic analysis are presented below.

6.1 Drivers for Growing Globally and Maintaining the Chinese Identity

While Chinese law firms snowballed and expanded globally, they intentionally maintained their national identity in the international market. Based on the outcomes of our data analysis, we identified three main drivers for growing globally and maintaining the Chinese identity.

- **Driven by the Chinese economy and government**
"Our firm has been expanding its legal service capabilities from Shanghai to the world. With the continuous deepening of the "One Belt One Road" Initiative, Hainan, as the Free Trade Zone, is becoming a new hot spot for international trade. We are already preparing to set up our new branch there." (Interviewee of Law Firm 14)
- **Driven by internationalised Chinese client firms**
"So many branches were built because of the needs of clients, including overseas customers. There are clients everywhere, including MNEs with branches in different regions. The first reason is our clients' needs." (Interviewee of Law Firm 1)
- **Driven by the Chinese founders with international background**
"The founders of our law firm ... all had undergone overseas education and work experience in China. They are international and local. Therefore, in the beginning, Sigma focuses on representing a Chinese bank or consortium for their bank loans and overseas bond issuance." (Interviewee of Law Firm 18)

6.2 Experimentation-based Internationalisation

Internationalised Chinese law firms were found to adopt an experimentation-based internationalisation. Most firms set up Hong Kong branches as their first step into the international market as Hong Kong has a similar legal system to the UK and US. Additionally, they engaged in various international modes simultaneously and tested and changed between different modes in foreign markets. Table 6.2 below details the theme of experimentation-based internationalisation.

- **Starting from one (Hong Kong) to more locations**
"Internationalisation is mainly represented in the establishment of the Hong Kong branch. Hong Kong is connecting the world. Domestic clients generally go to Hong Kong to IPO abroad." (Interviewee of Law Firm 19)
- **Co-existence of multiple modes of internationalisation**
"It has grown very rapidly in the capital markets over the past years, and many Chinese lawyers are engaged in international business. Now we set up overseas offices in London, Seattle and Singapore. At the same time, we have established strategic partnerships with Hong Kong-based law firms and with international law firms." (Interviewee of Law Firm 14)
- **Shifting/testing different entry modes**
"In order to follow the Chinese firms to 'go out', our firm reformed from state-owned institutions into a private partnership. The Partner meeting became the highest authority in the Firm, and the newly elected management committee formally took over the firm operations." (Interviewee of Law Firm 10)

6.3 Management Practices to Maintain the Chinese Identity

A number of management practices were found to help internationalised Chinese law firms maintain the Chinese identity in their international branches/offices. These included:

- **Ethnocentric approach for branch leaders**
- **Hiring local staff for language capital**
- **Building Chinese hierarchical decision culture**
- **Adopting Chinese fixed-fee low pricing model**
- **Digital working system developed by Chinese law firms**

These practices are related to people management, cross-border control, and digitalisation. These management practices reflected that Chinese law firms were trying to maintain a national identity while internationalising in foreign markets. Figure 6.1 below details the theme of management practices required to maintain the Chinese identity.

6.4 Managing the National and International Paradox via Ambidextrous Management

Maintaining a Chinese identity raised challenges for the internationalisation of Chinese law firms. A few ambidextrous management practices were found:

- **Co-existence of local and global service**
- **Co-existence of partnership and business management structure**
- **Co-existence of exploration and exploitation in service**
- **Co-existence of standardised and localised people management**

Figure 6.2 below details the theme of managing the national and international paradox via ambidextrous management within the above-established themes.

Figure 6.1 Illustrative quotes for management practices to maintain the Chinese identity

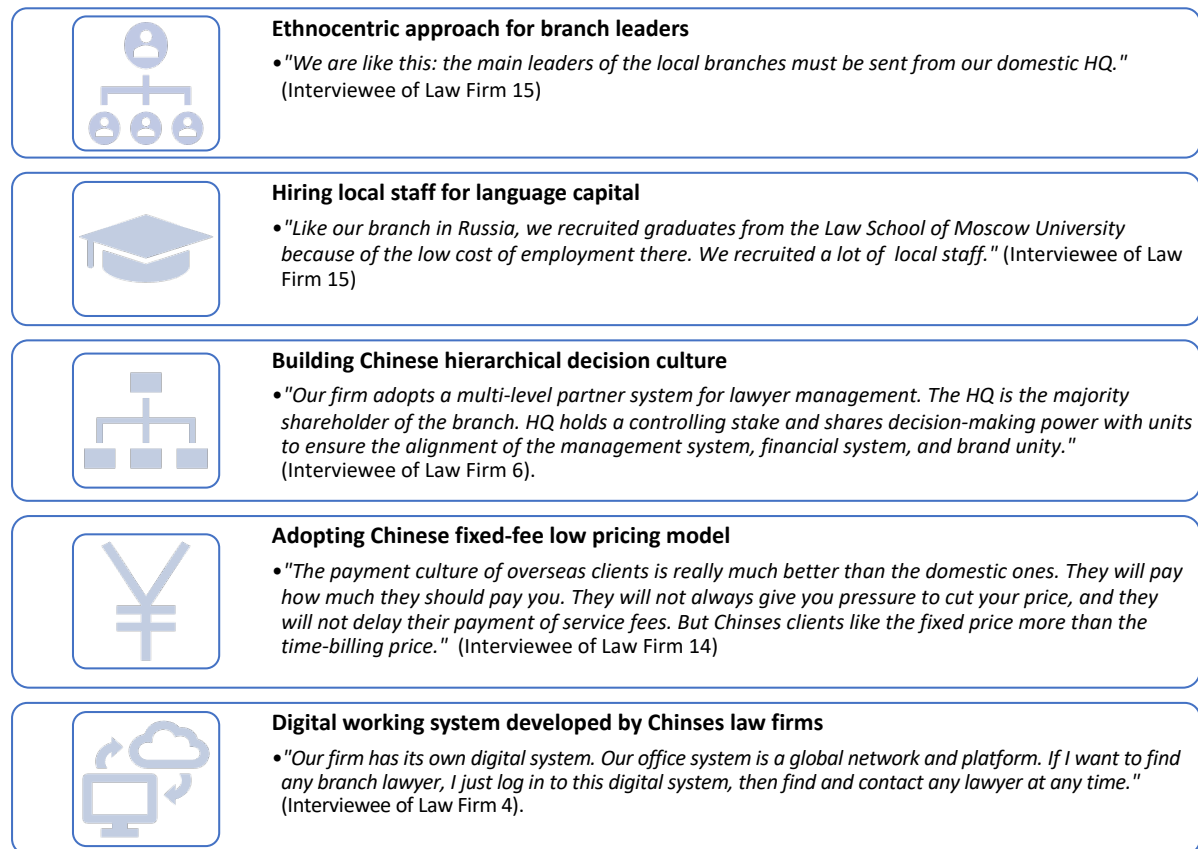
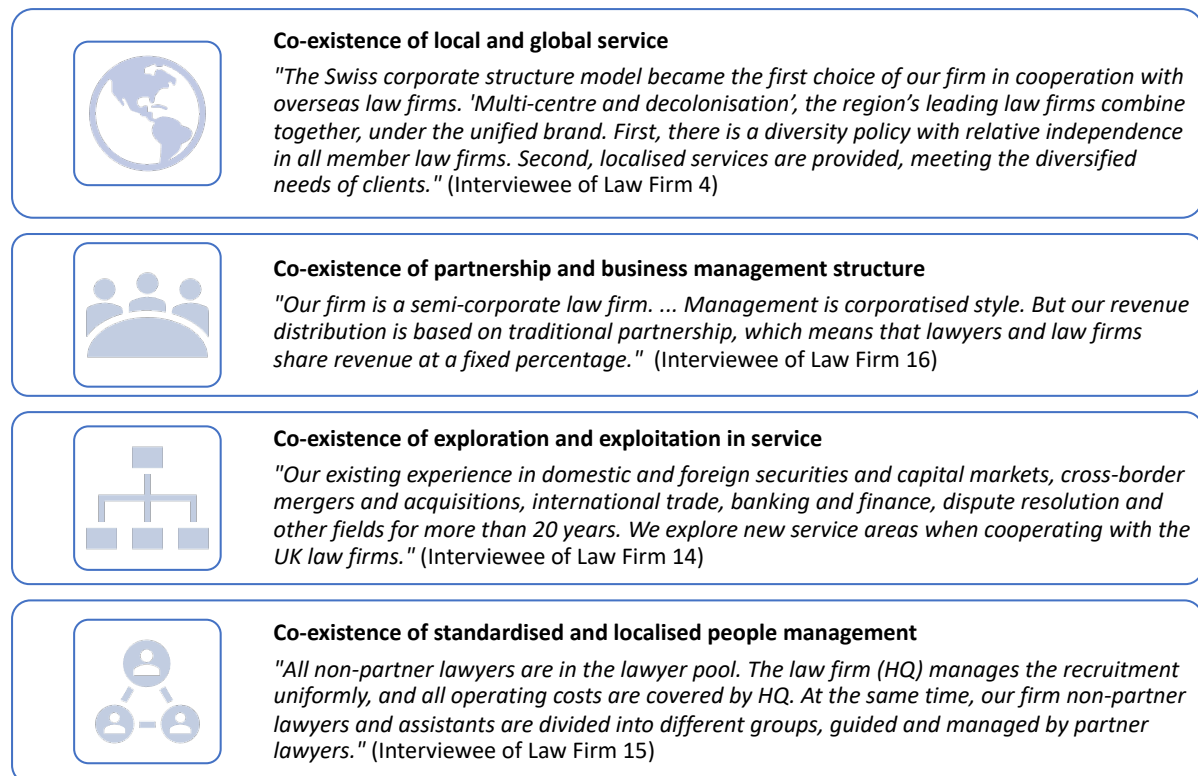


Figure 6.2 Illustrative quotes for the elements of ambidexterity in management



7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research was carried out to explore the drivers that affect the internationalisation of Chinese law firms and lawyers, including human resources management, business operations, digital technology applications, knowledge learning and innovation and entry modes into unknown markets. It aims to answer the question of how law firms from the emerging markets, as latecomers, can internationalise successfully and overcome the challenges encountered in international markets.

The research investigated a broad range of issues related to internationalised Chinese law firms, including:

- 1) As latecomers and newcomers, law firms from emerging markets face significant challenges due to reputational weakness outside of home markets. Reputation is a key enabler for PSFs to signal their service quality and attract new international business outside their home countries.
- 2) Law firms need to manage the tension between global integration and local responsiveness. As Legal jurisdictions differ across borders, they need to localise their service in foreign markets. The local adaptation to different foreign markets and circumstances hinders the global expansion of law firms.
- 3) Cultural difference brings challenges for law firms from emerging markets. Emerging countries, such as China, have a relatively high-power distance and mainly adopt the hierarchical management structure within law firms. Internationalised Chinese firms maintain their Chinese identity during internationalisation, which can be developed as a country-specific advantage in retaining and attracting Chinese clients overseas.

The research identified a number of factors that can facilitate the performance of internationalised Chinese law firms. The most important drivers of operational performance are:

- 1) Technology & Digitalisation
- 2) Exploitation
- 3) Localisation
- 4) Exploration
- 5) Globalisation
- 6) IHRM flexibility & alignment

These factors have different impacts on internationalisation outcomes, including unit performance, strategy implementation, and innovation in services of these Chinese law firms. The findings of the relationship between these drivers and outcomes not only contribute to our understanding of the under-investigated phenomenon but also help legal practitioners improve the cross-border management and facilitate the internationalisation of law firms from emerging markets.

The researchers carried out a detailed analysis of the data, which involved statistical modelling to identify the drivers that have the greatest impact on these issues. The analysis identified a number of factors that were consistently linked to all of the outcomes investigated and so, in many respects, these drivers and outcomes are inter-linked. Thus, in addressing the challenges that arise when law firms internationalised from emerging markets, opportunities can also arise for effective management to overcome the complexity between home and host countries.

The research findings suggest four intertwined priorities to successfully manage the internationalisation of Chinese law firm and their elite lawyers, especially when they involve cross-border legal service provision:

- **Having/building global mindset**

For law firms to adapt to the increasing volatility, complexity, and uncertainty in the dynamic international environments and markets, managers and lawyers in internationalised Chinese law firms need to have a global mindset. They also should deeply understand the need and challenges in providing the cross-border legal services as their clients are internationalising rapidly in recent decades and they must quickly respond to clients' requirement in the global reach. Additionally, having or building a global mindset is the way forward to enable more Chinese law firms to sustain their international reputation and positions.

Lawyers and managers of Chinese law firms need to be more mindful of managing the national and international paradox when they enter foreign markets and provide cross-border professional services. They need to develop their firm-specific advantages by adopting ambidexterity in their service and management during internationalisation. In addition, it is recommended that they neither simply duplicate the strategies of incumbent multinational entrepreneurs (MNEs) from developed economies nor merely copy the methods from product industries. Conversely, they need to adopt experimentation-based internationalisation to accumulate knowledge in foreign markets.

This project also suggests that practitioners need to be aware of the unique characteristics of internationalised law firms from emerging markets. This kind of firm maintains most clients from their home countries and they better understand their home markets. This gives them a competitive advantages. That is why internationalised Chinese law firms now dominate their home markets, even though foreign law firms entered China but only dominated for a short period.

- **Adopting flexible and agile management**

There is an urgent need to develop and leverage more innovative and flexible forms of global management. Lawyers and managers of Chinese law firms need to be more mindful of managing the national and international paradox (i.e., growing internationally but maintaining the Chinese identity) when they enter foreign markets and provide cross-border professional services. Firms can establish a flat and flexible structure where each unit is rooted deeply in the local culture, recruiting local experts as a workforce and understanding local legal systems and government policies. They also need to pursue standardised and flexible management simultaneously. In addition they can develop their firm-specific advantages by adopting ambidexterity in their service and management during their internationalisation.

Significant differences exist between home and host countries, which add complexity to the internationalisation of Chinese law firms. Unlike incumbents from developed countries, Chinese law firms suffered from the country-of-origin effects that included less competitive advantage and weak reputation. Additionally, they encountered challenges due to liabilities of foreignness, latecomer disadvantages, and country constraints. They need to overcome the above challenges when expanding their business abroad.

The data revealed that internationalised Chinese law firms pursued both standardised and flexible management simultaneously. They required the branches to comply with the headquarters' policy in order to maintain the firm's reputation, service quality and control. At the same time, they remained a flexible space where the branches remained agile enough to respond to the dynamic external environment and to maintain branch autonomy and professional independence. They adopted an experimentation-based strategy to accumulate their experience and knowledge in unknown markets, and they maintain various managerial tactics to trade-off the tension between home and host markets.

- **Further enhancing technology and digitalisation**

The internationalisation process is being disrupted by technology. In this regard, law firms from China have advantages when compared to traditional law firms from developed economies. As newcomers to the global market, Chinese law firms can rapidly capture market opportunities, meet clients' needs, and adopt a digital transformation strategy to transform their management and service delivery. They need to pay attention to the developments in technology and to think ahead to see how they can use technology to provide better services.

For the Chinese internationalised law firms, this project reveals that rapid internationalisation is based on digitalisation as well as learning and innovation. Learning and innovation enabled by digitalisation in the firms interviewed were found to be central to their rapid and successful internationalisation. Digitalisation also facilitates and accelerates the knowledge translation process to enhance the effectiveness of knowledge learning and innovation in global law firms from emerging markets. Therefore, practitioners of Chinese law firms should reflect on their leadership and vision, analyse the national and international context around them, and promote integration, learning and innovation during the internationalisation process.

Appendix A: Notes on Methodology

This section provides further details about the methodology.

A.1 Literature Review

Due to the development of the global economy and the advancement of technology, law firms from emerging countries have started to internationalise. This includes the rapidly internationalisation of Chinese law firms (Li, 2019; Liu & Wu, 2016). Between 2000 and 2018, 123 Chinese law firms expanded overseas. As latecomers and newcomers, these law firms face significant challenges due to reputational weakness outside their home markets (Luo & Tung, 2007; Mathews, 2002, 2006). Reputation is a key enabler for them to signal their service quality and attract new international business outside their home countries (Hitt, Bierman, Uhlenbruck, & Shimizu, 2006; Lu, Quester, Medlin, & Scholz, 2012). Similar to other industries' internationalisation, these law firms need to manage the tension of global integration and local responsiveness. Jurisdictions differ across borders so dramatically that international law firms need to be localised in overseas markets (Segal-Horn & Dean, 2011). The local adaptation to different foreign markets and circumstances hinder their global expansion (Salvoldi & Brock, 2019). In addition, cultural difference brings challenges for law firms from emerging markets. Emerging countries, such as China, have a relatively high-power distance and mainly adopt the hierarchical management structure within firms (Fu, Bosak, Flood, & Ma, 2019; Fu, Ma, Bosak, & Flood, 2015; Fu, Ma, Flood, Bosak, Liu, & Zhang, 2016). This results in the new strategy that internationalised Chinese law firms maintain their Chinese identity during internationalisation, which can be developed as a country-specific advantage in retaining and attracting Chinese clients overseas (Suter, Munjal, Borini, & Floriani, 2021). Chinese law firms follow their existing clients who go abroad. To better serve their international clients, these law firms need to maintain the national and international identities simultaneously in order to provide consistent service to their clients.

In order to identify the key drivers for the internationalisation of Chinese law firm and answer how and why those law firms can survive in the international markets, the research team conducted an extensive review of literature on IHRM Flexibility vs Alignment (Beletskiy & Fey, 2020), IHRM Standardization vs Localization (Beletskiy & Fey, 2020; Lu & Bjorkman, 1997), IHRM Strategy vs Operation (Beletskiy & Fey, 2020), Short-term vs Long-term and People-driven vs Profit-driven (Collings, Nyberg, Wright, & McMackin, 2021; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Marchington, 2015), Globalisation vs Localisation (Williams, Colovic, & Zhu, 2017), Organisational ambidexterity (Fu, Flood, Bosak, Rousseau, Morris, & O'Regan, 2017), Ambidexterity & innovation (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; He & Wong, 2004), Technology & Digitalization (Akter, Wamba, Gunasekaran, Dubey, & Childe, 2016; Wamba, Gunasekaran, Akter, Ren, Dubey, & Childe, 2017), Absorptive Capability (Schleimer & Pedersen, 2013) and Unit performance (Delaney & Huselid, 1996). Given the unique characteristics of law firms, as a typical professional service firm (PSF), they are knowledge-intensive firms with low capital intensity and professionalised workforce (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Zardkoohi, Bierman, Panina, & Chakrabarty, 2011). They provide customised services to their clients (Maister, 2012; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). Based on their differences from product industries, the internationalisation of law firms differs from manufacturing or general service firms. For example, product industries mainly adopt entry modes such as wholly-owned subsidiary, joint venture, non-equity arrangement (Anderson & Gatignon, 1986; Brown, Dev, & Zhou, 2003; Elia, Larsen, & Piscitello, 2019), while PSFs

are more likely to adopt networks (Salvoldi & Brock, 2019; Suseno & Pinnington, 2018). Drawing upon the literature review, this study systematically examines the internationalisation of law firms, in the fields of cross-border HR management, internationalisation strategy, and the adoption of digital technology in international law firms.

A.2 Data Collection

The research was carried out between May and September 2021. Two types of data were collected from experienced lawyers and partners of internationalised Chinese law firms. The first type is quantitative data via a cross-sectional online anonymous survey. The survey included questions on the respondents' experience with their current units and their backgrounds. An online invitation was sent via email to the lawyers of internationalised Chinese law firms (participants) to advise them about the survey and encourage their participation. This was followed up after the administration of the survey with two reminders.

The second type of data collected is qualitative data. The qualitative data collection was accomplished by conducting open-ended, semi-structured, and in-depth interviews with lawyers who had been working in internationalised Chinese law firms for at least five years and were familiar with the internationalisation process and firm management. An interview guide was developed based on the literature regarding internationalisation and management (McQuillan, Scott, & Mangematin, 2018; Pinnington & Gray, 2007; Segal-Horn & Dean, 2007; Winch, 2014). These open questions helped us to gain a detailed understanding of how Chinese law firms internationalise their legal services and manage cross-border cooperation, especially the tension between global integration and local responsiveness. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. This project follows the principles of strict confidentiality and voluntary participation. It also never collects personal private information and firm's trade secrets.

A.3 Data Analyses

The analysis of quantitative data and presentation of the data predominantly involved descriptive statistics such as frequencies and means. Descriptive statistics were used to explore the participants' views on different aspects of their work. Statistical analysis was completed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v.26). Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

To analyse the qualitative interview data, we used a thematic analysis process (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Gioia & Pitre, 1990) to assist with the categorisation and interpretation of our data. This method is adopted widely in qualitative research on MNEs and EMNEs (e.g., Lynch and Jin, 2016; Witek-Hajduk and Grudecka, 2019). NVivo was used to conduct the thematic analysis, including categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalisation, integration, iteration, and refutation. We followed an established qualitative data analysis process to extract relevant themes (Spiggle, 1994).

A.5 Ethical Issues

The survey was strictly confidential and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were advised that a full report of the study's findings would be provided to the organisation.

Participants were assured that under no circumstances would participants' individual responses be made available to any individual. Access to the data was limited to the research team and the data was stored electronically and protected by secure passwords known only to the research team.

The study was fully approved by Trinity Business School's Research Ethics Committee.

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