Narrative Study on Successful Career Transition Based on Experiences of Chinese Vocational College Maritime Students

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Abstract

Chinese vocational college maritime graduates play a crucial role in the maritime field. They operate ship equipment, ensure maritime safety, and provide important support in achieving the goal of China becoming a maritime power. Therefore, paying attention to their career development is of significant importance. This study adopted a narrative research approach and aimed to delve into the inner journey of successful career transition among 12 Chinese vocational college maritime graduates. It was conducted through semi structured interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. The research findings indicate the interviewees identified several challenging factors associated with the maritime profession. These factors include monotonous and oppressive job tasks, high work pressure, confined spaces on ships, fixed and inflexible salaries, limited career advancement opportunities, a sense of disconnection from society, difficulties making friends, challenges achieving work–life balance, and limited prospects for career growth. These factors contributed to a subjective sense of professional dissatisfaction among them. However, once they transitioned to land-based jobs, they achieved subjective professional success. This can mainly be attributed to the fact that land-based jobs allow them to take care of their families, pursue a more independent lifestyle, maintain social connections, and lead a stable life. Based on the research findings, it is recommended ship companies and society as a whole pay attention to the career development of maritime students and improve the working environment in the maritime industry. This is necessary to meet their needs for balancing family responsibilities, pursuing a more independent lifestyle, and maintaining social connections. By addressing these aspects, it will help facilitate subjective professional success among maritime students.

Keywords: narrative study, successful career transition, Chinese vocational college maritime students, subjective success

1. Introduction

In recent years, maritime transport, one of the oldest and most economical modes of transportation, has increased productivity and energy use efficiency through its modernization. Seafarers play a key role in maneuvering ship equipment and ensuring transportation safety and are an important part of achieving the goal of turning China into a strong maritime nation (Dachev & Lazarov, 2019; Beukelaer, 2021; Bao et al.,2021).

However, in recent years, there has been a serious brain drain of maritime professionals, with less than 1/3 (about 2,300) of China's maritime graduates choosing to pursue a career in navigation each year (Wang et al., 2020). This study also found that mariners' subjective perceptions of their career development were generally unsuccessful, as evidenced by work–life imbalance, low sense of accomplishment, lack of interest, sense of closed environment, pay not meeting expectations, and difficulties in making friends (Wang et al., 2022). These problems lead to physical and mental fatigue (Shan & Neis, 2020), a sharp decline in job satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2019), a decline in mental health (Beukelaer, 2021), and even a strong desire to leave (Bao et al., 2021).

However, the pursuit of career success or subjective career success is a goal that almost all practitioners pursue in their careers (Liu & Shao, 2008; Al-Ghazali, 2020; Blokker et al., 2019; Haenggli & Hirschi, 2020). Nautical practitioners are no exception. By achieving professional success, people not only gain a fulfilling sense of

achievement, satisfaction, and value, but also enjoy a high quality of life (Yu, 2011; Gordon, 2021). Subjective career success refers to individuals' positive subjective feelings, evaluations, and recognition of their current work experiences and career development outcomes, including career satisfaction (Choi & Nae, 2022; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Eby et al., 2003), work–life balance, sense of meaning in work and life, sense of contribution to work and life (Arthur et al., 2005), external work–life balance, external reward and internal satisfaction, and work–life harmony (Zhou & Sun, 2010).

Because ship workers stay on moving ships for long periods of time (Shan & Neis, 2020), live far away from the land, and live and work in the same space, their work performance may be affected by personal factors and environmental factors (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). Personal factors refer to personal learning experience, work experience, age, marital status, professional title, etc. (Eccles & Wigfield , 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Environmental factors may include the working environment and social environment on board the ship, such as the communication atmosphere between colleagues, the cooperation situation, and the impact of the rapid development of an external situation on the crew (Wang et al., 2022). The working conditions and quality of the crew also largely reflect their quality of life.

Therefore, this study aimed to delve into the inner world of Chinese vocational college maritime graduates who have undergone career transitions. Through semi structured interviews, we listened to this group's subjective perceptions of their maritime career experiences and their inner journeys of successful transition. Furthermore, we explored the reasons for their subjective career dissatisfaction and the motivations and factors contributing to successful career transitions. Through this research, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the intrinsic needs and career development expectations of maritime graduates and provide substantive recommendations and guidance for improving the attractiveness of the maritime profession and enhancing the career satisfaction of maritime professionals.

2. Method

2.1 Methodology

Narrative research is a method that involves organizing and analyzing the life stories of interviewees, with the aim of giving these stories deeper meaning (Surangi, 2022; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). These stories can encompass exciting events as well as ordinary experiences from everyday life (Prince, 2022; Ge, 2014). Denzin (2004) proposed four steps in narrative research: attending, retelling, co-constructing, and contextualizing.

This study adopted the narrative research method and collected data through semi structured interviews. It aimed to analyze the career development stories of Chinese vocational college maritime graduates in a narrative manner. The study aimed to explore the factors that led to their subjective career dissatisfaction and the experiences and reasons behind achieving career success. Throughout the research process, we strived to preserve the interviewees' original words as much as possible. We refined and interpreted the interview materials, selecting key content to be included within the framework of narrative research, to gain a deeper understanding of the journey of successful career transition among Chinese vocational college maritime students.

2.2 Participants

This study utilized purposive sampling to select 12 maritime graduates from a vocational undergraduate institution in China as research participants. These interviewees met the following inclusion criteria: (1) graduated from the maritime technology or marine engineering technology program 3–5 years ago, (2) perceived subjective career dissatisfaction, and (3) expressed willingness to participate in the study and provided informed consent. Ultimately, we conducted semi structured interviews with these 12 interviewees. Table 1 presents their relevant information.

Table 1. Basic information table of the interviewees

Participants	Gender	Age	Residence	Major	In-ship time
D01	Male	26	Gansu Qingyang	Maritime Technology	11 M
D02	Male	27	Chongqing Chongshou	Marine Engineering Technology	3 M
D03	Male	26	Henan Luohe	Maritime Technology	6 M
D04	Male	27	Hainan Haikou	Marine Engineering Technology	16 M
D05	Male	29	Hubei Wuhan	Marine Engineering Technology	30 M
D06	Male	29	Shaanxi Xianyang	Marine Engineering Technology	32 M
D07	Male	25	Hainan Lingshui	Maritime Technology	4 M
D08	Male	29	Gansu Baiyin	Maritime Technology	30 M
D09	Male	28	Sichuan Mianyang	Marine Engineering Technology	48 M
D10	Male	27	Guizhou Tongren	Marine Engineering Technology	20 M
D11	Male	25	Sichuan Suizhou	Maritime Technology	6 M
D12	Male	22	Hunan Shaoyang	Maritime Technology	12 M

Note: This table presents the interviewees and their background information, where M represents months.

2.3 Data Collection

This study used a semi structured interview method to collect data. The interview guide included the following questions: (1) What position did you hold and what were your specific job responsibilities in the maritime industry? (2) How do you feel about the maritime profession? (3) What are your expectations for a career in the maritime industry? (4) What choices have you made and why did you make those choices? (5) What are the differences between the maritime profession and your current new profession? How do you feel about it psychologically?

Before the interviews began, counselors and dedicated teachers from the Maritime College introduced and connected the researchers with maritime students who met the research criteria. These students had graduated 3–5 years ago and had previously worked on ships before transitioning to a different career. The research objectives were explained to them, and it was verified their subjective career experiences indeed met the criteria for subjective career non-success. Furthermore, they expressed their willingness to participate as interviewees. Before each interview, the researcher briefly introduced the content of the study to the interviewee and provided a consent form. The provided consent form detailed information about the research process, the privacy rights of the research subjects, and the possibility of audio recording during the interview. Participants were asked to read and understand the consent form and sign it to indicate their agreement to participate and be interviewed.

The interviews for this study were conducted in Haikou, Hainan, from March to May 2022. Because of the participants being located in different parts of the country and the impact of the pandemic, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews. Therefore, semi structured interviews were conducted using communication platforms such as WeChat voice calls or Tencent video calls. During the interviews, the researcher provided enough open-ended space for the participants to respond and recorded the interviews for subsequent transcription and analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

After completing the interviews, to ensure the accuracy, consistency, and integrity of the research text, the researcher consolidated the recorded information and sent it back to the interviewees for supplementation, revisions, and final confirmation. This collaborative process enabled the researcher and participants to co-construct the research text, enhancing the credibility of the study (Cai, 2019). Subsequently, following the steps of narrative research, the researcher repeatedly read the research text to identify key events and local concepts. By retelling the participants' experiences and describing their narratives, a local story was ultimately formed, from which research findings were

extracted. To ensure the validity of the data, we employed the method of triangulation of sources, comparing the consistency between the experiences, narratives, and information about professional experiences from Chinese vocational maritime graduates (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2023) to validate the research results.

2.5 Quality Control

To enhance the credibility of the study, the five following measures were implemented: (1) Researcher training—the researcher underwent relevant training before conducting qualitative research to enhance their research competence and methodological proficiency. (2) Building a safe and trusting relationship with participants—the researcher established a secure and trusting relationship with the participants, encouraging them to share their personal experiences and feelings truthfully. (3) Diverse sample selection—heterogeneity in terms of age, residence, duration of professional experience in maritime-related fields, and academic backgrounds was considered during the sample selection process to gather diverse perspectives and experiences. (4) Utilizing interview techniques—the researcher employed active listening, empathy, clarification, and other interview techniques to obtain authentic and comprehensive interview data. (5) Maintaining objectivity and reflexivity—the researcher maintained an objective and neutral stance throughout the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. Reflection and memo writing were utilized to record relevant issues encountered during the research. These measures contributed to enhancing the credibility of the study.

3. Results

The narrative thread provides a detailed account of the participants' subjective experiences of their maritime careers, highlighting both the lack of subjective success in their maritime professions and their journey toward subjective success in their new careers. By capturing the participants' narratives, we aimed to identify the reasons behind their subjective lack of success in their maritime careers and the factors contributing to their subjective success after transitioning to new occupations.

3.1 Subjective Perceptions of Unsuccessful Maritime Careers

All participants in this study had worked in the maritime industry for varying durations, ranging from 3 to 48 months. As a result, they had personal experiences and subjective perceptions of maritime careers. Based on these experiences, the participants expressed their own perspectives on their maritime work experiences.

According to the description provided by D01, they had a subjective perception of their maritime career being unsuccessful. They believed working on a ship means working for others, with relatively rigid and fixed wages. Even if the salary increased to 40,000–50,000 RMB per month, it would not be enough to attract them. Additionally, D01 mentioned the limited space on the ship became monotonous and uninteresting over time. It is evident the cramped space on the ship and the fixed nature of the wages contributed to D01's subjective perception of their maritime career as being unsuccessful.

Initially, when I went on board, I had the intention of working hard and earning money for a few more years. After disembarking, I first took the supplementary examination for the Third Mate certificate and planned to continue in the maritime industry for a long time. However, things changed after I got off the ship. Later, I went to Hainan to obtain an Advanced Seafarer certificate. After spending a few days in Hainan, I gradually started indulging in leisure activities and lost interest in going back on board. The ship, with its limited space, no longer holds any appeal for me. I consider working on board as unsuccessful. I feel like I am just working for someone else, with fixed wages. The salary on board is not enough to entice me. Even if I were to advance to Second or Third Mate and receive a monthly salary of 25,000 or 40,000 RMB, I still don't find it particularly tempting. (D01)

According to the description provided by D03, they also had a subjective perception of their maritime career as being unsuccessful. They believed the nature of maritime work is monotonous and the ship's space is confined, which hindered their ability to receive external information. As a result, they felt disconnected from the rapidly evolving society and at risk of losing their social attributes. It is evident D03 considered the characteristics of the maritime profession as contributing to their perception of it being unsuccessful because this work environment restricted their connection with society and their personal social development.

On the ship, you are confined to running the vessel, and it's also difficult to receive signals from the outside world. It's challenging to stay up to date with social changes and developments. In comparison, maritime work is relatively closed off, and it becomes somewhat disconnected from the rapidly evolving society. Therefore, overall, I consider a maritime career as unsuccessful. (D03)

According to the description provided by D06, they too had a subjective perception of their maritime career as being unsuccessful. They believed maritime work often puts individuals in high-pressure and mentally demanding situations. Additionally, prolonged engagement in maritime work leads to a disconnection from society, making it difficult to establish stable interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the income derived from a maritime career is relatively fixed. Based on these reasons, D06 decided to abandon the maritime profession. In summary, D06 believed a maritime career could not meet their expectations, leading to a subjective feeling of being unsuccessful, and as a result, they made the decision to pursue a career change.

In conclusion, I decided to give up working on ships due to several reasons. First, I had been on board for too long, and my actions aligned with my initial plan of only working on ships for a few years. Second, I experienced a high-pressure work environment that eventually took a toll on my mental well-being. Third, I felt that continuing in this career would lead to a disconnection from society. Fourth, despite spending so many years in the industry, I couldn't establish a solid professional network that would significantly benefit my future development. Last, the wages on board were stagnant, but on land, there are plenty of opportunities for personal growth given the current situation in the country. Taking all these factors into account, I made the overall decision to abandon the maritime industry as I was unsatisfied with my past experiences and subjectively deemed my career development in that field as unsuccessful. (D06)

According to the accounts of D04 and D05, their subjective experiences of maritime careers were unsuccessful. They found the work to be boring and oppressive and lacking fun and excitement. Additionally, they mentioned difficulties in making friends and limited opportunities for social interaction outside of the maritime industry. Furthermore, the nature of their work created an imbalance between their professional and personal lives, making it challenging to meet the needs of both. They believed the prospects for career advancement in the maritime field were limited, with few opportunities for further growth and development. All of these factors led the interviewees to seriously question the significance of pursuing a maritime career. Despite their efforts to adapt to the drawbacks of maritime work, they ultimately could not persist and had to choose to abandon their maritime careers. Overall, these interviewees' experiences indicate maritime careers failed to meet their professional needs and personal satisfaction, resulting in their decision to give up on the maritime industry.

I eventually quit maritime work because I found it boring, and the lack of close friends made me feel very uncomfortable. I chose to return to working on land. I believe that working in the engine department on the ship for such a long time was unsuccessful because I couldn't balance it with my family life. (D04)

I consider working on the ship to be unsuccessful because I feel that my maritime career didn't have much development. Life on the ship was too boring and dull, and I couldn't find a fulfilling lifestyle. (D05)

According to the account of D08, their subjective experience of a maritime career was unsuccessful. They believed promotion in the maritime profession is difficult, and despite being given hopes of promotion by the company, it was never realized. This situation left the interviewee feeling extremely frustrated and hopeless. Their experience indicates their expectations of promotion and career development in the maritime profession were not fulfilled, leading to a sense of disappointment and discouragement.

The company promised me that I could be promoted to the position of third officer once I joined the ship. However, when I actually went on board, they didn't give me the opportunity to become a third officer. Instead, I had to work for one contract period and then disembark. When I joined the ship again, they promised me once more that I could become a third officer, but they never fulfilled that promise. Every time I went on board, I had to fulfill a full contract period of about 8 months. They always gave me hope but never satisfied it. It felt like they were constantly making empty promises. In the end, when the company called me to join another ship, I refused. Furthermore, the company withheld my certificates because I had not completed the full 5-year contract that I had signed. Therefore, subjectively, I feel that my career development was unsuccessful. (D08)

According to D09's account, their subjective perception of their maritime career experience was not very positive. Despite having approximately 4 years of experience in maritime work, they believed maritime jobs do not allow for the accumulation of work experience and the establishment of professional networks like jobs on land do. It felt like starting from scratch once they returned to work on land. They also expressed concerns about the long-term commitment to working on ships, worrying it might become a dead-end that prevents them from disembarking and adapting to work and life on land. These viewpoints indicated their dissatisfaction, concerns, and considerations regarding their future career development in the maritime industry.

I had been working in the maritime industry for nearly 4 years. I started with a 1-year internship on a ship, then worked as an engineer, followed by positions as a fifth officer, fourth officer (deck officer), and finally spent the last 2 years as a third officer. I was just a few days away from qualifying for the second officer certificate, but I decided not to continue and disembarked instead. I don't feel regretful about it. If you consider maritime work as a fallback option, you'll never be able to leave the ship. However, spending 3 to 5 years on a ship and then coming back feels like starting from scratch because the knowledge and experience gained on board are not applicable on land. You can see that even those who have been working on ships for several years or even decades struggle to transition to land-based jobs. (D09)

3.2 Subjective Success in Their New Careers

According to the participants' accounts, they held a subjective perception of their maritime career experience as being unsuccessful. They mentioned several issues related to maritime work, including the monotonous nature of the job, rigid and fixed wages, the confined space on board ships, the limited social interaction and disconnection from society, the boredom and pressure of the work, difficulties making friends, the imbalance between work and family life, limited career prospects, challenges in career advancement, and the inability to build professional networks. These issues contributed to the participants' perceptions of their maritime careers as being unsuccessful.

To avoid continuing these unsuccessful experiences, the interviewees decided to give up the maritime profession and chose to return to land to pursue new careers. Through the interviewees' narratives, we can understand their reasons for choosing a new profession and their feelings toward it. This transformation aimed to seek a better working environment and opportunities for development to meet their career expectations and improve their quality of life.

3.2.1 Balancing Family

According to D03's account, he gave up the maritime profession and chose to start his own business on land. The most important reason for this decision was the ability to better take care of his family through work on land. Additionally, he found the income he could achieve on land was not less than that in the maritime profession, and life on land was more fulfilling and comfortable. Furthermore, he believed there were more opportunities for development and better career prospects on land. Compared to the maritime profession, he felt more successful and comfortable working on land.

Before I went on board, I had already set a wedding date. Initially, I planned to take leave and get married on land, but it didn't work out because the bride's father objected to it. Afterward, I came to Haikou from my hometown, and through a friend's introduction, I stumbled upon the current opportunity and started my own business. I found that I could earn just as much on land as I did on the ship, and I could also take care of my family. Life on land is much more fulfilling, and things are better overall compared to being on the ship. Initially, I was quite attached to the maritime work and even thought about going back to the ship. But now, I have no intention of going back to the ship at all. I'm already married, and my wife is over 5 months pregnant and about to give birth soon. I need to take care of my family, so I don't want to go back up there. Moreover, I feel that there are greater prospects for development on land. There are more opportunities on land, and the lifestyle on land is what I desire. (D03)

According to D05's account, he gave up the maritime profession and chose to return to land to study and pursue a career in IT. The most important reason for this decision was to take care of his sick parents. In comparison to the maritime profession, he found that working in IT on land allowed him to earn a higher salary, live a better life, and have the opportunity to make many friends. As a result, the interviewee now enjoys the pleasure of working on land and no longer chooses to go on board a ship.

Before, the highest salary I received on the ship was 8,000 Chinese yuan, which is approximately around 1,200 US dollars. An 8,000 monthly salary was much lower than my expectations. During my time in school, we used to talk about earning over 10,000 per month, but the reality was far from my expectations. This led to a significant gap between reality and what I had hoped for, which gradually made me more and more disappointed, ultimately leading to a sense of disappointment. Furthermore, working in the maritime industry made it difficult to achieve a work–life balance. So, the main reason I left the ship was to take care of my family. At that time, my parents fell ill and needed to be hospitalized. However, I couldn't be with them while on the ship, so I decided to disembark and accompany my parents, trying my best to be by their side. After disembarking, I faced a lot of pressure. I entered a new industry and devoted myself to self-studying IT without hesitation. Eventually, I felt quite successful working in IT on land, earning a monthly salary of around 40,000 to 50,000 Chinese yuan. Life on land is better in many aspects, and I have friends on land. After spending a long time on land, I no longer want to go back on board a ship. (D05)

According to D07's account, he gave up maritime work and chose to pursue land transportation. The main reason for this decision was that he believed taking care of his girlfriend and being with her was the most important choice. Additionally, compared to maritime work, he experienced the advantages of freedom, flexibility, and the opportunity to meet more people in land transportation. Therefore, he made this decision and feels satisfied with choosing to work in land transportation.

If I didn't have a girlfriend, given the opportunity, I would choose to go on board a ship. However, now I prioritize my girlfriend above all else. Currently, I work in land transportation on land, and although the salary is slightly lower, it offers more freedom and flexibility. I have the chance to meet more people on land, whereas on the ship, the number of people is limited and doesn't change much. (D07)

According to D09's account, the most important reason for him to transition from the maritime industry to land work was because he was already married and needed to take care of his family. Additionally, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic hindered his ability to continue working in the maritime industry. Furthermore, considering long-term development, work on land allows for the accumulation of work experience and connections, and the future career prospects are more promising. The interviewee believed that, compared to maritime work, work on land has more advantages and can lead to personal success. Therefore, he made this transition and feels satisfied with choosing to work on land.

I was influenced by multiple factors, and I had to consider the long term. Working on land allows me to gradually accumulate work experience and connections, which can contribute to future development. The main reason I didn't persist in maritime work was because I got married and needed to take care of my family. Additionally, the impact of the pandemic played a role. I disembarked in 2020, coinciding with the outbreak of the pandemic, and I decided not to go back after returning. I feel that working on land is much better than being on board a ship. (D09)

According to D04's account, he believes career success means having a stable job, starting a family, and taking care of loved ones. However, he admits he has not achieved these goals yet. Therefore, he has decided to return to working on land to fulfill these ordinary but important life aspirations and experience a subjective sense of career success. He hopes that, by returning to work on land, he can create a stable and happy living environment for himself and his family.

Indeed, after starting a family, it is possible to go back to working on board a ship. For me, career success means having a stable job, having a wife, having two children, being able to take care of my parents, and being able to work hard outside without any concerns, even if it means enduring some hardships myself. (D04)

3.2.2 Pursuing a Life of Freedom

According to D01's account, the interviewee had an encounter with sales work during their third mate makeup exams and found it brought them a lot of freedom and enjoyment. Compared to working on board a ship, they had more time and freedom while working on land, avoiding the monotony of ship life. Because of the positive experience of working on land, they decided to continue their development on land and eventually become their own boss. As a boss, they have the freedom to manage their own time, including going on trips and engaging in recreational activities. This lifestyle of freedom makes the interviewee feel very satisfied and successful.

Thinking about the 3-month wait for the third mate makeup exams, I thought maybe I could find a job to earn some extra money. After being introduced by classmates and friends in Haikou, I found a job selling POS machines. At the beginning, the salary wasn't high, around 2,000 to 3,000 RMB per month, but the working hours were flexible. After all, there's more freedom on land, and I can freely roam around without getting bored. Making money on land isn't particularly difficult, and the cost of living is manageable, so I decided to pursue my career on land. Now I am my own boss. I earn more in the summer and less in the winter. The more I work, the more profit I make for myself. I have a lot of freedom with my time, I can sleep in if I want to, and I can go out for travel, fun, exploration, and indulging in delicious food. (D01)

3.2.3 Rejecting Social Disconnection

According to D12's account, to avoid social disconnection and stay integrated with society, the interviewee decided to give up their maritime job and return to land for other work. This job not only provides a decent salary but also does not require staying in one place. They can also plan their own time and go on trips to relax and unwind. The interviewee is quite satisfied with this lifestyle.

After sailing for a year and realizing that I couldn't keep up with the fast-paced development of the world, I grew dissatisfied with my career as a seafarer. I became tired of the life on board and no longer wanted to continue sailing.

I believe that my maritime career was unsuccessful and prefer my current job on land. I can earn around seven to eight thousand yuan per month, have the freedom to move around instead of staying in one place, and even have the opportunity to enjoy leisure activities. (D12)

3.2.4 Stable Life

According to the account of D08, if the shipping company they worked for could fulfill the promised career advancement and salary increase, the interviewee would be willing to continue working in the maritime industry. They are well-adapted to the maritime work and do not suffer from seasickness. However, after transitioning to a job on land, they have obtained a stable job that brings them peace of mind. Additionally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a hindrance to their return to working on ships.

Actually, I would have been willing to continue working in the maritime industry if the company had fulfilled their promise of promoting me to third officer. I have a calm mindset, and, while other crew members tend to get seasick during rough weather, I have no reaction at all. I can eat normally while others struggle to eat for days. However, currently, I have found stability in my job on land, and with the added factor of the ongoing pandemic, I am hesitant to return to working on ships. (D08)

4. Discussion

The study described the journey of Chinese vocational college maritime graduates who felt subjectively unsuccessful in their maritime careers and decided to abandon these careers for a new field to pursue subjective career success. Studies have found the seafaring profession is perceived to be monotonous, boring, and depressing. The automation and modernization of modern shipping has led to monotonous and boring work for seafarers, which is compounded by the isolation and remoteness of the marine environment (Jegaden et al., 2019). Maritime work is often high-pressure, requiring high levels of concentration and physical and mental stress for long periods of time, leading to a dramatic decrease in job satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2019).

The spatially enclosed nature of maritime work is also an issue, with crews being dispatched for long periods of time to work on ships far from land and lacking contact with the outside world (Shan & Neis, 2020). Difficulties in communication on board ships, lack of internet and communication signals, coupled with the long drifting time of the ship, leaves the crew working in a limited space and social context with potential trauma and psychological stress (Dachev & Lazarov, 2019).

In addition, the rigid salary, the difficulty of career advancement, and the disconnection with the outside world of the maritime profession have also contributed to the dissatisfaction of maritime graduates with the profession. Staying on board for long periods of time causes them to be unable to maintain a balance with their families, to be closely connected to the rapid developments in the outside world, and to adapt to the rhythm and ways of life on land (Jiang et al., 2018; Torabi et al., 2021). Crew members' work time contracts make it difficult for them to adjust to normal life ashore and may lead to health and mental disorders (Dachev & Lazarov, 2019).

These problems make the seafaring profession disconnected from society, creating negative feelings and increasing willingness to leave (Bao et al., 2021). Difficulties in making friends also affect the mental health and well-being of seafarers, and prolonged stays on board limit their communication and socialization with the outside world (Carrera-Arce et al., 2022). The closed nature of maritime work and the homogeneity of the work content limit crew members in terms of interpersonal relationships and work experience accumulation (Bao et al., 2021).

To avoid the perpetuation of the subjective sense of unsuccess in a maritime career, Chinese high school maritime students have decisively abandoned the career and returned to land to start their own businesses or pursue other careers. After changing careers, it is important to be able to take care of your family and maintain a balance between work and family. A proper work–life balance can increase satisfaction and help with many spiritual and psychological problems (Shukla, 2021). Land-based jobs offer comparable benefits to seafaring careers and the ability to experience a rich life. Financial stability and freedom of life are important parts of meeting the needs in the hierarchy that enriches our lives (Sharath, 2022). Land-based jobs offer more career opportunities and prospects, as well as the opportunity to make more friends and gain more work experience and contacts.

In addition, giving up sailing work also means refusing to disconnect from society and maintaining a state of integration with it, which helps increase happiness. Staying connected and socially integrated with others can reduce loneliness and increase well-being (Becker et al., 2021). Transitioning back to land and finding a stable job to lead a normal and fulfilling life is also considered a form of success.

In addition, if you decide to switch back to land-based self-employment, become a freelancer, make a profit for yourself and work hard, you will be able to experience the joy of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy of work. Freelancers are significantly more satisfied with their leisure time and score higher in job satisfaction than other self-employed workers, employers, and wage workers (Zwan et al., 2020).

In conclusion, by giving up their maritime careers and moving to a new field, Chinese college maritime students are able to escape the subjective sense of unsuccessful maritime careers and feel a fulfillment of success by finding work on land that meets their needs, achieves work–family balance, and enables them to enjoy a free and flexible lifestyle.

5. Conclusions

Based on a narrative study involving 12 Chinese vocational graduates majoring in maritime studies, these graduates described their subjective feelings of dissatisfaction with the maritime profession and their subjective experiences of success after transitioning to new careers. The research findings showed the maritime profession was characterized by monotonous, dull, and oppressive work content, often under high-pressure working conditions leading to mental stress. The limited and confined space on ships, along with the rigid and fixed salary structure and difficulties in career advancement, further contributed to their subjective sense of dissatisfaction. Additionally, the lack of access to external information resulted in a sense of disconnection from the rapidly developing society. Challenges in forming friendships and the limited opportunities to accumulate work experience and professional networks, along with the imbalance between work and family life and limited career prospects, all led these Chinese vocational maritime graduates to perceive the maritime profession as being subjectively unsuccessful.

However, in pursuit of subjective career success, they chose to abandon the maritime profession and return to land to start their own businesses or pursue new careers. Our findings suggest they considered the following factors important after transitioning: being able to take care of their families, earning a good income, experiencing a fulfilling life, and having more opportunities for career development and making new friends. Additionally, once they became freelancers or entrepreneurs, they could enjoy the freedom and flexibility of working on land, allowing them to autonomously schedule leisure time and ultimately pursue a life of freedom. Moreover, opting for land-based work also means rejecting disconnection from society and maintaining a state of social integration by finding stable employment and leading a modest yet fulfilling life.

The results of this study elucidate the reasons why Chinese vocational maritime students perceive the maritime profession as unsuccessful and explain the factors contributing to their subjective career success after transitioning to land-based work. Based on these findings, it is recommended maritime companies and society pay attention to the career development of maritime students and improve the working environment in the maritime industry to meet their needs to balance family responsibilities, pursue a life of freedom, and maintain social connections. This will help facilitate the subjective career success of maritime students in their professional pursuits.

First of all, shipping companies need to strictly implement the existing relevant systems to protect the rest time of the sailors and reduce their pressure. Second, the maritime industry needs to establish relevant career promotion and salary security systems to ensure the interests of sailors. Third, society and shipping companies need further scientific research to explore the convenient and preferential connection of signals such as ship communication and networks at sea. Finally, the society relaxed the family members of the sailors along with the navigation system, increasing the opportunity for family members to get along.

It is suggested future researchers consider using quantitative research methods to validate some of the findings of this study. Additionally, exploring the issues and challenges faced in the maritime profession from different perspectives, such as those of students, teachers, and ship company managers, could provide insights and solutions to address them.

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