Acculturation Strategy and Its Impact on Job Satisfaction: the Case of Professional Chinese Immigrants in the Australian Workplace

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We sincerely thank Prof. Uichol Kim for helping to contextualize the Acculturation Attitudes Scale. Thank Dr Brian Cooper for his valuable assistance in the development of methodology. Special gratitude is extended to Dr Mingqiong Zhang for his helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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ABSTRACT This study tested the individual differences of professional Chinese immigrants' (PCIs) attitudes toward acculturation strategies, and explored the effects of these strategies on job satisfaction. Based on Berry’s seminal work on the acculturation process, the study recruited 214 PCIs in the Australian workplace to complete the questionnaires. Results of cluster analysis revealed that the PCIs have a predominant preference to maintain their home culture, with most of them adopting Separation strategy and Integration strategy. Furthermore, results supported the relationship between acculturation strategies and job satisfaction: PCIs adopted the Assimilation strategy have the highest level of job satisfaction and Separation as the lowest. The paper also presents directions for future research.

Keywords: Chinese immigrants, professionals, Australia, acculturation, job satisfaction

In the last few decades, the global workforce has increasingly become heterogeneous (Bakker, Van Der Zee & Van Qudenhoven 2006; Ouaked 2002). This is particularly the case in Australia due to several waves of skilled migration from a broad range of cultural and geographic backgrounds (DeCieri & Olekalns 2001) over the last 30 years, with special emphasis on migration from non-traditional countries such as China. Of the 21 million respondents in the 2006 Census in Australia, 23.9 per cent were foreign born (DIAC 2008), out of which China-born were ranked as the third largest foreign born population (ABS 2006). Given that mainland China is ranked as one of the largest source of highly skilled migration to Australia, Chinese immigrants have increasingly become an important part of the Australian workforce (see ABS 2007; DIAC 2008).

When relocating from one country to another, immigrants have to go through an inevitable acculturation process associated with their migration. They need to make choices between their traditional cultures and the mainstream host cultures (Berry 1997). These choices relate to the acculturation issues involved in the process of immigration, which are comprised of four strategies: Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization (Berry 1997; 2003; Berry, Kim, Power, Young & Bujaki 1989). Researchers believe that there is a critical link between acculturation strategies and immigrant adjustment (Shim & Schwartz 2007; Swagler & Jome 2005), so it is essential to understand the role that acculturation plays in the process of integration of immigrants into the workplace (Leong 2001). However, very few studies have been focused on this issue in the context of Australia. Taking up this challenge, this study investigates the acculturation process of professional Chinese immigrants (PCIs) in the Australian workplace. It first examines the individual differences of
PCIs’ attitudes toward acculturation strategies, and then discusses the impact of different acculturation strategies on their job satisfaction. In this paper, we define professionals as those who are qualified to demonstrate a high degree of knowledge or skills in a particular field. According to the definition, this group includes professors, managers, accountants, auditors, medical doctors, engineers, scientists, computer programmers and so forth (ABS 2009).

**ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES**

In multicultural societies, ethnic groups and their individual members, in both the dominant and non-dominant situations, must deal with the issue of how to acculturate, which is carried out by working out two issues. These two issues involve *cultural maintenance* (to what extent the cultural identity and good relationship with the native culture should be maintained) and *contact and participation* (to what extent the host cultural identity and good relationships with the host groups should be developed) (Berry 1984; 1997; Berry et al. 1989). When the two questions are considered simultaneously, an integrated model is generated to posit four acculturation strategies (Figure 1).

In Figure 1, these two relevant issues are addressed using attitudinal dimensions represented by bipolar arrows. Generally positive or negative responses (“yes” or “no” responses) to these questions intersect to define four acculturation strategies of Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization. According to Berry (1997; 2003), when individuals do not want to maintain their original culture and aim at complete absorption into the host culture, they are hiring the Assimilation strategy. By contrast, if individuals strongly retain their cultural identity and view the relationships with host culture as unimportant, they are adopting the Separation strategy. When people are interested in maintaining their original culture during daily interactions with the host cultural groups, the Integration strategy is their option. Finally, when individuals lose their original culture without establishing ties with the new culture, Marginalization has occurred.

Berry (1984)’s model of acculturation strategy was originally developed and tested in a variety of acculturated groups in Canada, where the population is comprised of ethnically heterogeneous groups.
Since then it has also been examined in other countries especially in the US context with different ethnic groups, providing sufficient evidence of supporting the theoretical premises (e.g. Choi & Thomas 2009; Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind 2000; Pham & Harris 2001; Shim & Schwartz 2007). The model assumes that societies advocate multiculturalism and immigrants have the freedom to choose how they want to engage in intercultural relations (Berry 1991; 2001; Berry et al. 1989). It is therefore suitable to study immigrants in the Australian context because Australia is a country advocating cultural diversities and multiculturalism (DIMIA 2003). Although it is still an unanswered question which strategy the China-born group in Australia tend to prefer, according to empirical studies targeting the immigrant population other than China-born groups, immigrants usually have a strong preference for the Integration strategy in a multicultural society (see Berry et al. 1989; van Oudenhoven, Prins & Buunk 1998). This leads to our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1**: Integration is the most preferred strategy among PCIs in the Australian workplace.

Individuals' choices of acculturation orientation have been shown to be influenced by a variety of personal characteristics (Berry 1997), including age at migration (e.g. Yeh 2003), length of residency in the host country (e.g. Choi & Thomas 2009; Oh, Koeske & Sales 2002; Shim & Schwartz 2007), gender (e.g. Ho 2006; Tang & Dion 1999), education experience in the host country (e.g. Berry 1997; Gong, Takeuchi, Agbayani-Siewert & Tacata 2003; Mahmud, Alam & Härtel 2008), past working experience outside home country (e.g. Black, Mendenhall & Oddou 1991; Selvarajah 2003), and mainstream language usage (e.g. Marín & Gamba 1996; Padilla & Perez 2003). According to the theory of acculturation and empirical studies, the paper examines the relationship between the demographic characteristics and acculturation strategy and hypothesizes that:

**Hypothesis 2**: Demographic characteristics can significantly influence the PCIs' choice of acculturation strategies.

**ACCULTURATION AND JOB SATISFACTION**

Job satisfaction is a multifaceted concept which can be affected by various factors including personal characteristics such as age, gender, education, and job tenure, as well as environmental
factors such as salary and benefits, opportunities for advancement, and social support at work (e.g. Au, Garey, Bermas & Chan 1998; Ea, Griffin, L'Eplattenier & Fitzpatrick 2008; Ellickson 2002; Leong 2001). However, studies of immigrants’ job satisfaction are relatively patchy (Au et al. 1998). Leong and Chou (1994) hypothesized that less acculturated Asian Americans may experience less job satisfaction and more stress than their more acculturated peers and will be prevented from maintaining a level of career success. Leong (2001) examined the above hypothesis and demonstrated that there has been a positive relationship between acculturation and job attitude. Mace and Carr (2005) conducted a research on immigrants in New Zealand and found that individuals adopting Assimilation strategy are more likely to have full employment, which is related to higher levels of occupational satisfaction. Au, Garey, Bermas and Chan (1998) have also found that acculturation is positively related to job satisfaction by testing 65 Chinese immigrant restaurant workers in New York. Ea, Griffin, L'Eplattenier and Fitzpatrick (2008) have reported that there is a moderate positive correlation between acculturation and job satisfaction among the Filipino registered nurses in the US. Thus:

Hypothesis 3a. PCIs adopting Integration and Assimilation strategies are more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction than PCIs adopting Separation and Marginalization strategies in the Australian workplace.

Furthermore, since Marginalization is considered to be the worst strategy in adapting into the host society (Berry 1997), it is further hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3b. PCIs adopting Marginalization strategy will have the lowest level of job satisfaction compared with PCIs adopting other strategies in the Australian workplace.

METHODS

Sample

Participants in the present study involved 214 PCIs residing in Australia. All of them were first generation immigrants who were born and raised in mainland China. Most participants were recruited from October 2009 to February 2010 in Melbourne and Sydney. The questionnaires were translated into Chinese as well and participants completed the questions whichever language they were familiar with. Sixty-four per cent of questionnaires were completed in English, Sixty four per cent of questionnaires were completed in English, and 36% were completed in Chinese. Of all the respondents,
139 were males and 75 were females. The mean age of the sample was 42.9 years old with 72.8% were between 31 and 50 years old and a predominant amount of the participants migrated to Australia before 35 years old. The majority (53.7%) of participants had lived in Australia for more than 10 years, 17.8% for 6-10 years, and 28.5% for less than 6 years. All the qualified participants had obtained at least a Bachelor degree or a university diploma in Mainland China in order to guarantee an obvious acculturation or adjustment process (Gong et al. 2003). Among them, 58.4% \((N = 127)\) had a PhD degree, 28.5% \((N = 60)\) had a Master’s degree, 10.3% \((N = 22)\) had a Bachelor’s degree as the highest degree, and the others completed professional degrees. A majority (88.3%) spoke Chinese (including Mandarin, Cantonese and other Chinese dialects) at home, 7.0% spoke both Chinese and English and only 4.7% of them spoke primarily English at home. Half of the respondents were current members of certain Chinese communities or associations, while about 35.0% had never joined in any such organizations.

**Measures**

Demographic information: This part collected the participants’ demographic information such as age, age at migration, sex, marital status, education and working experience in China and Australia, length of residence in Australia, primary language spoken at home, perceived social-economic status, role in organization, and organizational tenure.

Acculturation strategy scale: This scale was adapted from the Acculturation Attitudes Scale developed by Kim (1988). The original Acculturation Attitudes Scale consisted of two set of subscales (16 items per subscale), one was used to explore the strategies of Korean-born migrants towards the American culture, and the other was used to examine the strategies of these Korean migrants towards the Korean culture. In this study, the original scale was culturally contextualized so as to suit the PCIs in the Australian workplace context. Participants were asked to rate these questions by using the Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The alpha coefficient for the subscale of strategy towards Australian culture was .78 and the subscale of strategy towards Chinese culture was .83.

Job satisfaction scale: Job satisfaction was measured using the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (MOAQ). The scale contains 3 items with a 7-point Likert (from 1 =
strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) to test the overall satisfaction. The alpha coefficient of the scale was .78.

**Procedures and Data Collection**

A non-probability sampling method and questionnaire technique were used to collect quantitative data. The individual participants were selected by respondent-driven sampling (RDS) method among those PCIs who resided primarily in Melbourne. RDS is de facto a variation of snowball sampling, selecting participants from the friendship network of existing members of the sample (Salganik & Heckathorn 2004). The sampling process “begins when the researchers select a small number of seeds who are the first people to participate in the study”, and then these seeds recruit others to participate in the study (Salganik & Heckathorn 2004, p 196). The process of existing sample members recruiting future sample members will not stop until the desired sample size is reached (Heckathorn 1997; Salganik & Heckathorn 2004).

In line with the principle of RDS, the seed participants in this study were mainly recruited via friendship groups of the researchers and accessible Chinese associations in Australia. Individual PCIs were generally approached by email with a brief explanation of the research. Once they expressed an interest in participation, research survey packets were distributed to them. Survey packets included an explanation of the study, a demographic questionnaire, acculturation scale, and job satisfaction scale. These existing participants were allowed to recruit others to participate in the survey and send the survey packets to their recruitments. After completion, survey packets were returned by email, post, or collected by the researchers in person. All the questionnaires were returned anonymously.

**RESULTS**

**Acculturation Strategies among PCIs**

Mean scores were calculated to ascertain the respondents’ strategies toward Australian culture and Chinese culture. The overall rating for the item assessing strategy toward Chinese culture ranged from 2.00 to 4.56, with a mean of 3.35 \((SD = 0.45)\). The overall rating for the item assessing strategy toward Australian culture ranged from 2.44 to 4.75, with a mean of 3.62 \((SD = 0.38)\).

A cluster analysis was conducted linking strategies toward Chinese culture with strategies toward Australian culture. The cluster analysis is based on the respondents’ scores on sixteen items of
strategies toward Chinese culture and sixteen items of strategies toward Australian culture. In line with previous studies conducted by Kim, Helgesen, and Ahn (2002), the K-Means method was employed as the algorithm. The produced clusters were divided in advance into four by theoretical assumption. The cluster analysis for individuals’ acculturation strategies is presented in Table 1, which shows a clear cluster pattern: a large number of people belonged to the Separation category, followed by Integration, Assimilation, and Marginalization. Hypothesis 1, stating that PCIs would prefer Integration strategy the most, was not supported by this result.

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Relationship between Demographic Variables and Acculturation Strategies

Hypothesis 2, stating that demographic characteristics would significantly influence PCIs’ choice of acculturation strategies, was tested with techniques of contingency table analysis, Kruskall-Wallis test, and one-way between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA). Firstly, a couple of contingency table analyses were conducted to establish whether there were significant relationships between gender, marital status, education experience in Australia, education level, work-related experience outside home country before migration, primary language speaking at home, and survey language choice and acculturation strategies which PCIs adopted. A significant relationship was found between survey language choice and acculturation strategies, \( \chi^2(3, 214) = 35.17, p < .05 \). Among the PCIs choosing Chinese version surveys, 5.1% of them adopted Assimilation, 38.5% adopted Integration, 51.3% adopted Separation, and 5.1% adopted Marginalization. Among the PCIs completing English version surveys, comparatively, 31.6% of them chose Assimilation, 25.0% and 25.0% chose Integration and Separation respectively, and 18.4% chose Marginalization. No significant relationship was found between the other variables and the choice of acculturation strategies.

Then, a Kruskall-Wallis test was conducted with acculturation strategy as the independent variable and age at migration as the dependent variable. The four strategy groups were found to not significantly differ, \( \chi^2(3, 213) = .57, p > .05 \). Therefore, there was no statistically significant relationship between age at migration and acculturation strategy. Furthermore, a one-way between
ANOVA was conducted with acculturation strategy as the independent variable and length of residence in Australia as the dependent variable. Assumption of homogeneity of variance was judged to have not been violated. A significant effect was found for acculturation strategy, $F(3, 210) = 4.5, p < .05$. Post-Hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) were conducted to investigate differences between acculturation strategies for the length of residence in Australia. The mean for Assimilation ($M = 14.48, SD = 6.82$) was found to be significantly higher than the mean for Integration ($M = 10.56, SD = 6.96$) and Separation ($M = 10.52, SD = 6.91$), whereas the mean for Marginalization ($M = 13.50, SD = 6.78$) did not significantly differ from the means for the other three groups.

In summary, hypothesis 2 was partially supported as the results showed that only length of residence in the host country, perceived low socio-economic status, and survey language choice can influence the choice of acculturation strategies.

The Effect of Acculturation Strategies on Job Satisfaction

Mean scores were calculated to ascertain the level of respondents’ job satisfaction. Overall rating for this variable ranged from 2.67 to 7.00 with a mean rating of 5.82 ($SD = .86$). Normality of the distribution of the scores of job satisfaction was investigated. Values of skew and kurtosis were calculated for the distribution of scores for this variable. Assumption of normal distribution was violated and transformation was conducted to rectify this problem. The score for this variable was first reflected, and then a log transformation was applied, and, to maintain the rank order of the original raw scores, was again reflected, to produce a new variable. The transformed scores were found to be not significantly different to those of a normal distribution. The transformed variable was used in the subsequent analyses to represent the concept of job satisfaction.

A couple of Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between age, gender, education, and length of residence and job satisfaction. No significant difference was found between male and female participants in terms of job satisfaction. Furthermore, job satisfaction did not significantly vary with age ($r = .13, p > .05$). Education experience did not correlate with job satisfaction either ($F = 2.44, p > .05$). However, this study found a statistically significant weak correlation between length of residence in the host country and job satisfaction ($r = .15, p < .05$),
indicating that the longer period the participants had lived in Australia, the more likely they had a higher level of job satisfaction.

To test Hypotheses 3, stating that PCIs with Integration and Assimilation strategies would be more likely to have higher levels of job satisfaction in the Australian workplace than those who adopt Separation and Marginalization strategies, a one-way between-group ANOVA was conducted with acculturation attitudes as the independent variable and job satisfaction as the dependent variable. Assumption of homogeneity of variance was judged to have not been violated. A significant effect was found for acculturation attitudes, $F(3, 209) = 4.08, p < .05$. Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) found that PCIs who adopted Assimilation, $M = 1.45, SD = 0.39$, displayed significantly higher mean ratings of job satisfaction than PCIs who adopted Separation, $M = 1.21, SD = 0.35$. Mean ratings of PCIs adopted Integration ($M = 1.29, SD = 0.39$) and Marginalization ($M = 1.26, SD = 0.33$) were found to not significantly differ from one another or from the means of PCIs who adopted Assimilation and Separation. Hypotheses 2a and 2b were partially supported by these findings. Hypothesis 3a and 3b were not supported as only people with Assimilation strategy were found to have significant higher levels of job satisfaction than those with Separation strategy, while the job satisfaction of people with Integration or Marginalization did not significantly differ from people with the other strategies.

Since length of residence in Australia was found to be related to job satisfaction in the former analysis, a one-way between-groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted using participants’ length of residence in Australia as the covariate. The independent variable is acculturation strategy (Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization) and dependent variable is job satisfaction. After adjusting for length of residence in Australia, job satisfaction varied significantly with acculturation strategies, with $F(1, 208) = 3.28, p < .05$, partial eta squared = .05. The adjusted marginal means, as displayed in Table 2, show that the highest level of job satisfaction was held by people adopting Assimilation strategy, and lowest level of job satisfaction by people adopting Separation strategy. There was no significant relationship between length of residence in Australia and job satisfaction with $p > .05$, while controlling for acculturation strategies.
DISCUSSION

On the basis of acculturation theory and previous studies on immigrants’ acculturation, this study has explored the individual differences in PCIs’ attitudes toward the acculturation strategies of Assimilation, Integration, Separation, and Marginalization, and the effect of these strategies on job satisfaction. Results demonstrate that PCIs have a predominant preference to retain their heritage Chinese culture rather than adopt the Australian one, and acculturation strategies do influence individuals’ level of job satisfaction.

The present study infuses the acculturation theory with new blood as it reveals that the participants adopt Separation strategy the most and Integration the second. Such a finding is different from previous studies conducted in countries other than Australia on immigrants’ acculturation strategies, which shows that immigrants have a clear preference for the Integration strategy (e.g. Bakker et al. 2006; Berry et al. 1989; Choi & Thomas 2009; Zheng & Berry 1991). One possible explanation is that Chinese immigrants feel proud of the Chinese culture which is believed to be a representative example of world culture and has great impact on the world (Wu 2000). Therefore they want to maintain their traditional culture while a multicultural society such as Australia allows them to do so.

Some demographic characteristics are proved to relate to PCIs’ choice of acculturation strategies. Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Bakker et al. 2006; Choi & Thomas 2009; Kang 2006; Oh et al. 2002; Shim & Schwartz 2007), results in this study illustrate that there is a relationship between length of residence in the host country and acculturation strategies. However, results do not suggest that the longer residence in the host country predicts a higher level of acculturation because people who adopt Marginalization strategy do not significantly differ from those who use the Assimilation or Integration strategy on the characteristic of length of residence in Australia. People with the Assimilation strategy have lived in Australia longer than people with the other strategies, especially than those who adopt the Integration or Separation strategy. This indicates that the longer the immigrants have lived in the host country, the more possibility for them to favor Assimilation strategy.
Most of the PCIs completing the Chinese version surveys (89.8%) adopted Integration and Separation, indicating that heritage language preference may be able to predict individuals’ ethnic identity maintenance. This maybe because that language is a reflection of a given culture’s values and beliefs (Hofstede 2001; Zhang 2008), and those who prefer to use Chinese language indicate their maintenance of heritage cultural identity. The other demographic characteristics were not found to be significantly correlated with the levels of acculturation.

Our research also adds to the body of research on immigrants’ job satisfaction. PCIs who adopt Assimilation strategy hold significantly higher level of job satisfaction than PCIs who adopt Separation strategy, while perceptions of job satisfaction among PCIs using Integration and Marginalization strategies do not differ either from each other or from PCIs adopting Assimilation and Separation strategies. Length of residence is found to be positively correlated with job satisfaction. This is a foregone conclusion since along with the increased length of residence in the host country, immigrants learn and know more about every aspect of the host society and the host workplace, through which they can adjust themselves to fit the context. Results of the one-way between-groups ANCOVA indicate that after adjusting for length of residence in Australia, job satisfaction still vary significantly within acculturation strategies. More specifically, people with Assimilation strategy have the highest level of job satisfaction while people with Separation strategy have the lowest level of job satisfaction. This finding claims the importance of Assimilation strategy on developing higher levels of job satisfaction, while indicates that Separation strategy might be a potential impediment to job satisfaction. More empirical evidence are called for in future research to test whether Assimilation is the optimal and Separation the worst choice for developing positive job attitudes.

The above mentioned is a finding different from previous studies as it is broadly accepted that Marginalization is the worst adaptation strategy and “involves rejection by the dominant society, combined with own-culture loss”, which means “the presence of hostility and much reduced social support” (Berry 1997, p. 24). According to this common wisdom, it is logical to believe that people adopting Marginalization strategy have lower job satisfaction than people adopting the other acculturation strategies. However, findings of this study demonstrate that Marginalization is not the worst but Separation is. One possible reason is that those people with Marginalization strategy have
developed a third cultural identity beyond Chinese identity and Australian identity, which does not harm their adaptation. This new identity is suitable in the Australian workplace and can be easily accepted by the majority groups in the organizations. Evidence for this possibility can be tracked from the criticism of Berry (1984)’s model (see Rudmin 2003), but empirical support still need to be explored by future studies.

It is not surprising to find that people with Separation strategy has low job satisfaction. Separationists are those who strongly retain their heritage identity but do not adopt the host culture (Berry 1997). In line with Leong and Gim (1993)’s argument about the situation of Asian immigrants choosing Separation option in American workplace, PCIs who adopt the Separation strategy are more likely to use their traditional cultural values and behavioral patterns to deal with problems and get along with their colleagues in the workplace. As such, misunderstanding and conflicts may arise when those PCIs interact with their native-born colleagues and supervisors, leading to their experience of more stress and less job satisfaction (Leong 2001; Leong & Chou 1994).

CONCLUSION

Although purely aiming at PCIs in Australia, this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on immigrants and jobs. Results reveal that the PCIs in Australia use Separation strategy the most and Integration the second, indicating that they predominantly prefer to maintain their Chinese culture. Demographic characteristics such as length of residence and mainstream language usage in the host country contribute to the development of different acculturation strategies, which are proved to impact on individuals’ job satisfaction. Meanwhile, PCIs adopting Assimilation strategy have the highest level of job satisfaction, followed by Integration as the second, and Separation as the lowest. These findings reiterate the importance of acculturation in immigrants’ career development and success. It also provides meaningful information for Australian organizations to apprehend, work with, and manage such a group via increasing cultural sensitivity and awareness to avoid conflicts. Organizations which hire PCIs should develop effective acculturation programs to assist them in their transition into the host country’s workplace, and to reduce problems of economic, cultural, and social adjustments in Australia. This could lead to improved retention rates among PCIs and help organizations to make full use of the diversity brought by PCIs to increase productivity.
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Table 1: Cluster Analysis of Acculturation Strategies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acculturation strategy</th>
<th>Clusters: M (SD)</th>
<th>Total (N = 214)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Assimilation (N = 47)</td>
<td>Integration (N = 64)</td>
<td>Separation (N = 74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy toward Australian culture</td>
<td>3.90 (.24)</td>
<td>3.88 (.25)</td>
<td>3.37 (.21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy toward Chinese culture</td>
<td>3.03 (.29)</td>
<td>3.77 (.24)</td>
<td>3.45 (.22)</td>
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</table>

*Note. *p < .05

Table 2: Adjusted and Unadjusted Mean Job satisfaction for Four Acculturation Strategies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acculturation Strategy</th>
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<th>Unadjusted Mean</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Assimilation</td>
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<td>Integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalization</td>
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