Acculturation: an exploration of professional Chinese immigrants in the Australian workplace

Dr Ying Lu
Department of Marketing and Management, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia
Email: candy.lu@mq.edu.au

Dr Ramanie Samaratunge
Department of Management, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
Email: ramanie.samaratunge@monash.edu

Dr Charmine Härtel
Business School, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
Email: c.hartel@business.uq.edu.au
Acculturation: an exploration of professional Chinese immigrants in the Australian workplace

ABSTRACT: The way in which Professional Chinese immigrants (PCIs) position and re-position themselves in the workplace after migrating to Australia has been significantly under-researched. Based on 23 interviews, results revealed that most PCIs highly valued the Chinese culture and adopt separation as their acculturation strategy in daily life. Although many do feel like to develop more connections with the mainstream society, they find difficulties discovering appropriate channels to do so. To adapt to the work environment, they had to switch between cultures and negotiate identities depending on the situations at hand. The findings strongly suggest that organizations should pay greater attention to the function of acculturation in the workplace and manage immigrant employees via effective acculturation programs.

Keywords: diversity at work, ethnic minorities, cross-cultural behaviour, diversity and inclusion

Understanding immigrants’ acculturation experience is essential to develop efficient programs to assist them in adapting to the host country and workplace (Leong, 2001). However, few studies have investigated immigrant professionals from mainland China to developed countries like Australia to understand what strategy they may adopt to accommodate into the host society and advance their careers. Although there is a wealth of research on immigrants’ acculturation (e.g., Berry and Sabatier, 2010; Ea et al., 2008), studies conducted on Australian workplace have been limited (Author A et al., 2011). Whilst an increasing number of studies have emerged that investigated the acculturation of professional Chinese immigrants (PCIs) and its possible effect on work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction and affective commitment (Author A, 2011, 2012, 2013), studies on the role of workplace in shaping PCIs’ acculturation strategies remain limited (Author A, 2011).

A gap has been identified between the high expectation of contributions of Chinese-born professionals to Australia’s social and economic development and lack of understanding about difficulties they encountered in immigrating to Australia (Author A, 2011). The Chinese migrant professionals interviewed in Cooke et al.’s (2013) study reported that getting the first professional job in Australia was very difficult; many of them had to work in occupations below their
educational/professional qualifications and skill competence, preventing the employing organisations from deploying human capitals effectively to raise their competitiveness. Author A et al. (2011) investigated 214 Chinese professionals’ acculturation in Australia and found a majority of them prefer to retain their home culture without establishing close relationships with the host society; later, the authors found that this strategy was linked with low job satisfaction and low affective workgroup commitment (Author A, 2012, 2013). In their study, Author A et al. (2011) found that the more support the individual received from their managers and colleagues, the more likely he/she preferred an assimilation or an integration strategy. Yet, they did not investigate whether individuals put their preferred strategy into practice and what acculturation means to them at workplace. Without such information, it is difficult to make informed suggestions as to what the organisations should do to help their immigrant employees better accommodate to the workplace.

This study fills part of this research gap by investigating the acculturation experience at workplace of PCIs born in mainland China who currently live and work in Australia. It identifies the PCIs’ acculturation strategies and explores the role of workplace in shaping these strategies. PCIs’ perceptions about the host society’s attitude toward immigrant acculturation are incorporated to better understand the reasons why they adopt a certain strategy in practice.

We start the article with a theoretical background which highlights the research questions based on a review of acculturation attitudes and strategies. Then we discuss the strategies of inquiry and research design. Thirdly, we present the key findings and their implications for Australian employers and governments. The article concludes with a brief discussion on limitations and a future research agenda.

**ACCULTURATION ATTITUDES AND STRATEGIES**

Individuals who migrate to another country are likely to hold attitudes about how they wish to relate to other people and groups they encounter in their acculturation process; these are termed ‘acculturation attitudes’ (Berry et al., 1989). They must work out two issues: cultural maintenance (to what extent is cultural identity and a good relationship with the native culture maintained?) and contact and participation (to what extent is the host cultural identity and good relationships with the
host group developed?) (Berry, 1997; Berry et al., 1989). When the two questions are considered simultaneously, an integrated model is generated to posit four acculturation attitudes (Figure 1).

Accordingly, Berry (1997) identified four attitudes which individuals who migrate to other countries can hold: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. When individuals do not want to maintain their original culture and aim at complete absorption into the host culture, they are adopting assimilation. In contrast, if they strongly retain their cultural identity and consider relationships with the host culture as unimportant, they are using separation. When they are interested in maintaining their original culture during daily interactions with the host cultural group, integration is used. Finally, when they lose their original culture without establishing ties with the new culture, marginalization is the option.

Using a cross-sectional design, however, Author A et al. (2011) surveyed 217 PCIs and found that more of them were interested in retaining Chinese culture rather than embracing Australian culture and building up connections with the mainstream society, despite that they did not explain the reasons due to the shortcomings of utilizing self-report measures. Also, they did not investigate different situations or life domains (such as the workplace and home) in which a person may behave or would like to behave differently (Sakamoto, 2007).

Arbitrary conclusions may be drawn from a pure quantitative design investigating complex phenomena such as individual attitudes and cultural values (Chirkov, 2009; Sakamoto, 2007), so that qualitative elements are necessary when investigating acculturation to discover new facts (Chirkov, 2009). It is not clear how the PCIs treat their traditional culture and the host culture. Therefore the first research question for this study is to identify the PCIs’ preference among the four acculturation options:

RQ1: What are the PCIs’ attitudes toward retaining Chinese culture and adopting Australian culture (preferred acculturation options)? Why do (or do not) they want to retain their Chinese culture? Why do (or do not) they want to adopt Australian culture or build up connections with the mainstream society?
Berry (2003) further points out that not only should attitudes be investigated when doing acculturation research, but behaviours (real strategies that individuals put into practice) should also be taken into account. There is rarely a one-to-one match between an individual’s preference and what strategy is actually put into action (Berry, 2003). Immigrant groups are not always free to pursue the acculturation option they prefer (Berry, 1997, 2003). The host society’s rationale toward immigration upon immigrants’ choices of acculturation is likely to affect the real acculturation strategies adopted by them. Therefore, when studying the acculturation attitudes of minorities, how the attitudes of majority group members impact the way in which minorities choose to acculturate should be considered (Bourhis et al., 1997). In this study, we will explore whether access is provided to immigrants to participate in the larger society and how this influences the PCIs’ acculturation options adopted in reality. The second research question is proposed as the following:

RQ2: How do the PCIs experience acculturation in different life domains (acculturation strategies)? How can the larger society influence the PCIs’ acculturation?

RQ3: How do the PCIs experience acculturation at workplace? What is the role of workplace in shaping PCIs’ acculturation choices?

METHODS

This article draws qualitative data from a mixed-method design project conducted between October 2009 and January 2011 on PCIs in Australia. More specifically, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 informants, who have migrated to Australia from China in the last 20 years or so. Eight of the informants were female. The mean age for interviewees was 44, with 69.6% between 30 and 50 years. The average length of residence in Australia was 12 years. The detailed demographic characteristics of informants were shown in Table 1.
RESULTS

Preferred Acculturation Options among PCIs

Attitudes toward Chinese culture

Nearly all interviewees expressed the importance of staying true to Chinese culture and the wish to pass on these valuable spiritual and intellectual properties to their offspring, regardless of their acculturation attitudes. Of note is the emphasis by many PCIs on typical Chinese values of guanxi and mianzi when explaining their attitudes toward heritage culture. They acknowledged that these values unavoidably influence every aspect of their life, including work.

Knowledge and attitudes toward Australian culture and the larger society

The result of interviews supported Author A et al.’s (2011) finding that most PCIs preferred separation followed by integration, which answered RQ1. PCIs predominantly expressed their respect and fondness for the Australian culture. At the same time, they were proud of their own cultural values and language. Although showing a favourable emotion toward these perceived core values of Australian culture, including freedom, equality, respect and tolerance toward different cultures, PCIs’ attitudes and behaviours were nonetheless still strongly influenced by Chinese cultural values. PCIs also perceived that they were free to choose to maintain their traditional culture, since the society respects and values cultural diversity. Only one participant showed that he had no idea about Chinese culture and Australian culture, as he was not interested in cultural issues at all (marginalization).

Acculturation Experience in Daily Life

All informants displayed a strong ethnic identity of being Chinese, believing that their ways of thinking and behaviour patterns were deeply influenced by Chinese culture. All of them emphasised the importance of retaining traditional Chinese culture and expressed a strong commitment to the traditional Chinese festivals and customs. Also, most of them still relied on the Chinese community to draw friendship and support. Analysis of the transcripts revealed that cultural differences, language and the degree of openness in the larger society were identified as three significant contributing factors to the preference of socializing with people from the same cultural background.
Acculturation Experience in the Workplace

In general, the interviewees appreciated their current working environment and expressed satisfaction with their jobs. They valued autonomy and personal achievements, while believing that the relations between colleagues are normally simple and task-oriented. However, they still valued the connectedness and relatedness of others. To some extent, *mianzi*, *guanxi* and *renqing* were still serious concerns for many PCIs working with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds.

On the other hand, all informants believed that it was critical to adapt through active engagement with the local environment. Many respondents pointed out that the workplace provided them with the chance to assess locals and people from different ethnic backgrounds, since their colleagues were from different cultural groups. Also, they hoped to learn more about the mainstream culture from colleagues and accessed the larger society through being introduced by their colleagues. However, socialization after work, or even at work, was rare, which resulted in ‘shutting a major gate’ into the larger society.

There were some obstacles for PCIs’ career development and success in Australia. The dominant perceived obstacle was English skills. Whilst all informants believed that they have adequate English skills to well perform their jobs and have little problem in communicating with their colleagues, the majority of them felt reluctant to accept managerial positions, which require more professional and sophisticated communication and presentation skills. Personality was another important factor influencing individuals’ career development and success, which could be also related to English ability. Besides, cultural factors were perceived as a key obstacle for career success, since a person growing up under the influence of Chinese culture tended to be modest and does not like self-promotion, which was not in accord with the working culture in Australia.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on acculturation theory and previous studies of immigrants’ acculturation, the study involved a qualitative interview study to identify the PCIs’ acculturation attitudes and adaptation strategies in daily life and workplace, examine the meaning of acculturation in workplace, and
investigate the role of workplace in shaping these strategies. In spite of the relatively small sample size, some patterns of acculturation have emerged from this study.

**PCIs’ Acculturation in Australia**

This study identifies the general tendencies of the way in which PCIs orientate towards their heritage culture and participation in the larger society of Australia. In general, the informants value their Chinese identity and believe that they should retain the Chinese cultural aspects as long as it does not harm their integration to the workplace. At the same time, they appreciate the Australian culture, with many of them trying to embrace some aspects in order to develop cultural capital. However, more than half informants choose a *separation* strategy in different life domains, such as social relationships, language maintenance, family relations, and cultural customs and values. Some informants indicate that they focus more on their personal achievement without thinking too much about culture.

These findings infuses acculturation theory with new insights, since it contrasts with previous studies conducted in countries other than Australia which demonstrated that immigrants have a clear preference for the *integration* attitude. It is interesting to note that none of the informants actually adopt an *assimilation* strategy, which indicates that in Australia, *assimilation* maybe not a popular choice among the Chinese individuals. The reason is that, similar to Cooke et al.’s (2013: 2637) finding, the PCIs believe that they should retain some Chinese characteristics and ‘do what is appropriate that they feel comfortable and natural’. A majority of the PCIs consciously and subconsciously maintain, and occasionally assert, their ethnic identity. Such findings have deepened our understanding of Chinese immigrants’ adjustment in their new homeland.

In general, PCIs feel strongly that their Chinese origin is an important reflection of their identity. They speak Chinese after work, especially at home, and observe Chinese values and traditions in bringing up their children in the hope that their offspring will acquire traditional values through learning the Chinese language and culture. At a societal level, they attend cultural activities which are deemed an extension of their lives in the home country (Stodolska and Santos, 2006). They maintain contacts with friends and family abroad as well as develop ties with other Chinese in Australia, reminding them of, and strengthening their identification with, Chinese culture and their
ethnic community. Mature respondents especially express their preference for their heritage culture and social contacts with co-ethnics.

According to Navas et al. (2005), the more powerful a group is, the fewer changes and compromises its members are forced to make as a consequence of their relations with other cultures. Although ethnic Chinese are minorities in Australia, they are rapidly growing in size, and in the last decade the Chinese community has become an important ethnic group. This change means that Chinese immigrants can readily socialize with co-ethnics and live a comfortable life. In turn, social contacts exclusively in ethnic enclaves have facilitated the continual survival of norms and values of the heritage culture (Liu, 2011). Meanwhile, Australia encourages cultural diversity and it multicultural policies allow immigrants to retain their traditional cultures. Moreover, participants indicated that they believe that Chinese culture is a representative example of world culture which has a great impact globally. They have a highly developed sense of national pride, which strengthens their ethnic identity and translates into a strong will to pass on invaluable Chinese cultural values and language to their descendants.

Results also indicated that individuals who preferred the marginalization option did not actually reject their heritage culture or refuse to build ties with the host society. They do not consider too much about culture; rather, they are more concerned with personal preferences and goals. They are not concerned with maintaining their heritage culture or adopting the new culture, since ‘they are more involved with achieving personal goals’ in their country of settlement (Bourhis et al., 2009: 445). Therefore, for PCIs, marginalization is more like individualism (Bourhis et al., 1997). The finding may be useful in explaining results of the studies by Author A et al. (2012, 2013), in which PCIs using marginalization did not report lower job satisfaction and affective workgroup commitment compared with people using other strategies.

The Role of Workplace in Shaping the PCIs’ Acculturation Strategy

Workplace is an important source of knowledge for immigrants obtaining information about the culture of the new homeland. Also, it provides PCIs with a window for developing relationships with members of the host group and participating in the larger society. The PCIs want to build up good
relationships (guanxi) and socialize with their colleagues to access the mainstream culture. Many PCIs expressed their desire to participate in the larger society and they believed their workplace colleagues are the link between immigrants and the larger society. Besides formal working relationships, however, PCIs found that it was hard to form personal bonds with fellow-workers due to lack of socialization opportunities. Some even experienced a sort of indifference from their Anglo peers, resulting in their reluctance to make more efforts to proactively develop relationships with the locals.

The somewhat weak bond among colleagues led to the perception by PCIs of low social support at work, which is linked with an increased likelihood of adopting separation strategy, as pointed out by Author A et al. (2011). Realizing that it is difficult to socially engage with the locals and be treated as members of the majority group, many PCIs in practice shift their preference and primarily stay with their co-ethnic colleagues to fulfil their need for belonging to a particular social group and for coping with acculturation stress. Although they perceive no pressure from the majority group and mainstream society on their way of acculturation, they were lack of access to the larger society. As a result, these PCIs who wanted to adopt Australian culture and build up connections with the mainstream society in fact put separation into practice across their different life domains, signifying the importance of experience at workplace for developing a specific acculturation strategy. This also supports new developments in acculturation theory, which claim that immigrants’ acculturation strategies can be shaped by the majority’s attitudes and practices toward immigrants (Horenczyk, 1997; Navas et al., 2007; Navas et al., 2005).

The Meaning of Acculturation at Workplace: Identity Negotiation

Generally speaking, the PCIs value their heritage culture and believe that they should retain some Chinese characteristics. The PCIs do appreciate the elements of equity, freedom and respect in the host culture. Many of the informants reported that they have made serious efforts to adapt themselves to the Australian culture. However, they found that they can never be fully integrated with their non-Chinese colleagues due to cultural toughness, which was line with Fang et al.’s (2013) findings. Interestingly, their strong ethnic identity, however, does not necessarily harm their adaptation into the workplace, reflected in their use of identity negotiation strategy. The PCIs talk about and do
things the ‘Australian way’ when at work, while not divesting themselves of the influence of traditional values on their ways of thinking patterns. In other words, these immigrants adopt a strategy of enacting Australian values while remaining Chinese. In doing so, they are required to switch between cultures and consequently negotiate identities according to the particular situational characteristics at hand.

Identity negotiation involves coming to terms with the changing self (Hall, 1996). Whether the interdependent self or independent self becomes salient in what context becomes a function of an interaction between the person and the characteristics of the situation (Turner, 1987). Over time, as the contact between home culture and members of the larger society progresses and behavior becomes habitual, the PCIs feel that they are relatively stable in value but vary in behaviours, depending on the context of social interaction. Identity negotiation happens across the life domains, but in the domain of workplace, where mainstream culture is highlighted and strong, it is more typical and apparent. Hence, at the workplace, driven by the need to be accepted by the mainstream and maintain positive relationships with colleagues and managers, PCIs analyse expectations and act accordingly to create an acceptable character to avoid stigma, prejudice and conflicts. Specifically, they know that the assimilation or at least integration strategy is safer when the mainstream culture is strong around them. Therefore, assimilation and integration does not necessarily involve identification with the host culture or participation in the larger society, especially when there is little access or opportunity for them to do so. It is a rational strategy of ‘acting like Australians’ in the workplace and possibly also a type of identity-based impression management which is caused by ‘ethnic assignation’ and ‘identity threats’ as explained by Kenny and Briner (2013).

To be able to behave congruently with the environment, PCIs interpret acculturation as learning good practices in Australian culture. They consume local media to obtain information about every aspect of the larger society in order to show that they are not outsiders and to effectively communicate with colleagues. They voice different opinions and treat people equally, while maintaining values of the Chinese culture such as group-orientation, close-knit family ties, humility, being hardworking and prudent and respect for seniority (also see Liu, 2011). They take the workplace
as the primary area which is related to the issue of acculturation, since they do not encounter many opportunities to access the larger society and mainstream culture after work. They are always regarded as Chinese by members of both cultures (Liu, 2011), while being capable of interacting with host nationals as *Chinese Australians* and interacting with co-ethnics as *Chinese*. Thus, as indicated above, a strong ethnic identity and maintenance of heritage culture do not necessarily prohibit PCIs from fitting into the workplace.

It is widely reported by the informants that glass ceiling exists that prevents the PCIs from progressing to the higher level of hierarchy in organisations, even if they have the same qualifications and practical experience. Though this glass ceiling is not necessarily a result of discriminative practices, PCIs in this study do indicate that they have experienced a variety of subtle discriminative behaviors from individual colleagues (e.g., making sarcastic remarks/jokes that are culturally sensitive and regarding the Chinese migrant workers’ work experience as not valuable).

All participants indicated that they tried to work harder than others to ensure that their group was perceived in a positive light. This finding is in line with Kenny and Briner’s (2013) study, which revealed that the British black Caribbean graduate employees felt that they were negatively stereotyped in terms of their ethnic group membership and tried harder and put extra efforts to disprove stereotypes. The finding suggests that organizations need to identify whether and how current staff management practices indirectly or systematically disadvantage immigrant employees. Also, organizations and managers should consider how the organizational culture needs to be altered to respect and value the differences brought by diverse employees (Stone, 2010).

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Although findings of this research contribute to new knowledge, several limitations need to be addressed. First, the sample size is relatively small, with samples mainly from two large and highly multicultural cities: Melbourne and Sydney. According to ABS (2006; ABS, 2009), a majority of the Chinese immigrants in Australia reside in these two cities. Chinese immigrants may feel more at home in terms of their living needs, firms may be more experienced in supporting immigrant workers, and local individuals may be more used to working and interacting with colleagues from different cultural
backgrounds than those in smaller cities. Future research should recruit more informants from a wider range of geographical areas.

Second, it is not a comparative study between different ethnic groups or Chinese migrant workers across national contexts. Therefore the findings cannot necessarily be generalized to immigrants from other ethnic backgrounds, such as other Asian population groups (e.g., Korean, Japanese and Indian immigrants), let alone immigrants from other continents like Europe. Similarly, the findings may be unable to explain the case of immigrants who have settled in countries other than Australia.

Third, the samples recruited in this study are those who have already made a successful transition in their international migration. Those who are less successful in integrating to the local labor market and regaining their material life to the same level as that they had enjoyed in China may have a less positive acculturation experience. Without listening to the voice of this group of immigrants, we are not sure the extent to which our results are representative of the experience of work and life of the Chinese migrant professionals in Australia. In this sense, our research makes a moderate contribution in extending the study of immigrants in Australia. Future research would also benefit from examining the acculturation experience of Chinese immigrants who work in non-professional occupations and its influence across life domains.

Finally, acculturation as a complex process encompasses a broad range of phenomena. The experience during the immigrants’ transitions from one culture to the other, how they negotiate their old and new identities in different situations, and whether individuals’ attitude towards acculturation is changeable over time, however, were unclear, warranting future research in a longitudinal design.

REFERENCES

er=LN.


**Figure 1: Acculturation Attitudes**

![Diagram of acculturation attitudes with yes/no options for retaining original culture and maintaining relationships with the host group.](source)

Source: adapted from Berry (1997) and copied from Author A et al. (2011)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample PCIs</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>69.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>82.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether he/she has a religious belief</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>87.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently is or once was a member of Chinese associations/communities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>73.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>